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Henry the Eighth

(Chatsworth).

HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER

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I

DÜRER and Holbein: Holbein and Dürer: the two for most of mankind stand up like lighthouses out of the sea of Germanic painters that one knows barely by name or that one may know perhaps fairly well by their works. There are Martin Schongauer, Burgkmair, Conrad Vitz, Hans the German, Nicolas the German, the Upper German School, the Unknown Masters, and how many more?

It is at least convenient roughly to consider in one's mind that the two greater masters are for the Germanic nations the boundary stones between the old world and the modern, between the old faith and the new learning, between empirical, charming conceptions of an irrational world and the modern theoretic way of looking at life. Dürer stood for the great imaginers who went before. He seems to sum up the Minnesingers, the Tristan cycles, the great feudal conceptions. Holbein commences the age of doubts, of merchants, of individual freedoms, of broader ideals, of an opening world and new hopes.

Of course the moment one begins to consider the facts of the case very closely, the differences grow less and one sees that the two great peaks are part of one and the same chain. But the differences are convenient pegs on which to hang one's arguments, and these one may emphasize first. Holbein, for instance, was a fresco painter. But the fresco painters

who went before him were decorative workmen. Their frescoes were either subservient to the architecture (that is to say, they were frankly decorative), or at least they filled in spaces, they aided the architect. For the coming of Holbein it was necessary that architecture itself should disappear. He demanded parallelograms—as it were canvases set up before him on which to paint pictures. Thus the house became a square box with as few as possible square windows. So it remains to-day.

Holbein, again, painted decorations straight on to his pictures. That is to say, he painted on his canvas, his panel, or his paper either a frame of Renaissance cherubs and grape vines, or he introduced into his subject-compositions exotic decorative architecture of a Renaissance style. In this of course he was a long way from coming first. The Renaissance influence had come upon him as a child in his father's studio : the habit of painting decorative (*i.e.* not realistic) backgrounds to historic subjects had existed long enough before. Thus in a series of Biblical and historic subjects Conrad Vitz, a Suabian painter, who died in Basle in the first half of the fifteenth century, paints the figures of Abishai, Julius Cæsar, or Joachim with an astonishing realism ; they march before flat, gilded, and patterned walls which represent Bethlehem, the battlefield of Pharsalia, or the landscape behind the Temple of Solomon. That Conrad Vitz did this we may put down rather to his lack of ability to paint battlefields or landscapes than to any decorative leanings. He simply hung up a cloth behind his figures as did the Elizabethan actors who in front of their blank wall displayed the legend, "This is the Palace of the Capulets," and left the rest to the imagination of the spectator.

Hans Fries, however, a Freiburg painter of the

generation immediately preceding and overlapping that of Holbein, did actually paint perfectly realistic pictures : he then superimposed right across the top of the landscape-background thin decorations derived from Renaissance vine patterns in brownish red. Through the interstices one sees mountains, trees, figures, and what not. Thus alike from his father and from his age Holbein drank in the spirit of the Renaissance in its Germanic form.

From his father he inherited a gift far more valuable, a gift that has survived the Renaissance itself, a gift that leaves Holbein still far enough ahead of the most modern of the moderns—a gift of keenly observing his fellow-men, and of rendering them dispassionately. And indeed I am tempted so far to digress from my immediate line as to interpolate the remark that mediævalism stands for the love of outdoor nature, whilst the Renaissance revelled in the human form and in natural objects conventionalized. " Conventionalized " means humanized, your decorator taking an acanthus leaf and treating it so arbitrarily that it will fill any space on the inside or the exterior of a human dwelling-house. Holbein, as far as we know, cared comparatively little for what to-day we call Nature. He was the painter of men and cities, and inasmuch as modern life is a matter of men and cities, he was the first painter of modern life.

His landscapes are very few and not very significant. The one that most immediately occurs to one is that in the design of *Death and the Ploughman* in the Dance of Death series. On the other hand, his renderings of interiors, of implements, of carpets and musical instruments are not only innumerable, they are instinct with that pure love of the objects themselves that Dürer gave to his renderings of landscapes.

The life which Dürer's art seems to close was an

out-of-door life, or at least it was a life that was passed outside of great cities. His lords ride hunting in full steel from small castles on ragged and rather Japanese-looking crags; his Christ upon the Mount of Olives kneels beside a stunted crag; his Samson slays the lion in a Rhineland landscape.

The flesh of his figures is hardened, dried, and tanned by exposure to the air; his whole conception of the external world was more angular, more as if in early youth he had got into his mind that feeling of rocks, of broken trees, or of a luxuriant vegetation. When, as in the *Melancholia* design, he renders implements, tools, shaped stones, and other symbolic objects, he renders them not because he loves them for themselves, but because they are parts of his design.

Holbein's lords no longer ride hunting. They are inmates of palaces, their flesh is rounded, their limbs at rest, their eyes sceptical or contemplative. They are indoor statesmen; they deal in intrigues; they have already learnt the meaning of the words, "The balance of the Powers," and in consequence they wield the sword no longer; they have become sedentary rulers. Apart from minute differences of costume, of badges round their necks, or implements which lie beside them on tables—differences which for us have already lost their significance—Holbein's great lords are no longer distinguishable from Holbein's great merchants. Indeed the portrait of the *Sieur de Morette* has until quite lately been universally regarded as that of *Gilbert Morett*, Henry VIII's master-jeweller.

Holbein obviously was not responsible for this change in the spirit of the age; but it was just because these changed circumstances were sympathetic to him, just because he could so perfectly render them,

that he became the great painter of his time. Dürer was a mystic, the last fruit of a twilight of the gods. In his portraits the eyes dream, accept, or believe in the things they see. Thus his *Ulrich Varnbuler, Chancellor of the Empire*, a magnificent, fleshy man, gazes into the distance unseeingly, for all the world like a poet in the outward form of a brewer's drayman. The eyes in Holbein's portraits of queens are half closed, sceptical, challenging, and disbelieving. They look at you as if to say : " I do not know exactly what manner of man you are, but I am very sure that being a man you are no hero." This, however, is not a condemnation, but a mere acceptance of the fact that, from Pope to peasant, poor humanity can never be more than poor humanity.

It is a common belief, and very possibly a very true belief, that painters in painting figures exaggerate physical and mental traits so that the sitters assume some of their own physical peculiarities. (Thus Borrow accuses Benjamin Robert Haydon of painting all his figures too short in the legs, because Haydon's own legs were themselves disproportionately small.) One might therefore argue from the eyes of Holbein's pictures that the man himself was a good-humoured sceptic who had seen a great deal of life and took things very much as they came. On the other hand, Dürer, according to the same theory, must have been a man who saw beside all visible objects their poetic significance, their mystical doubles. But perhaps it is safer to say that the dominant men of Dürer's day were really dreamers, whilst those who employed Holbein were essentially sceptics, knowing too much about mankind to have many ideals left. For Holbein flourished and Dürer was already on the wane in the days of the Humanists and of the New Learning. And was it not that bitter, soured, and disappointed Duke

of Norfolk whom Holbein painted like a survival from the olden times, standing up rigid and unbending in a new world that seemed to him a sea of errors—who had been a great captain, to become later a miserable and trembling Catholic politician in a schismatic court—was it not that Duke of Norfolk who first said : " It was merry in England before this New Learning came in " ?

II

HANS HOLBEIN the younger, the son, the nephew, and the brother of painters, was born in 1497–98 in Augsburg, a town in those days world-famous, in which there flourished not only the spirit of commerce, but the spirit of adventure and the spirit of the arts. Its great merchants travelled, the first idea of the New World across the water having already reached them; the Fuggers were there; Peutinger had been to Italy unnumbered times, and it is even recorded that his four-year-old daughter could make a speech in Latin upon such state occasions as when the Emperor visited the city.

There were, moreover, great monastic establishments, great convents, and great churchmen. It was, in fact, Augsburg, a world-city in the modern sense of the term; not only was it prosperous, but under the influence of the commerces and the cultures of a newly awakening world, it was growing almost as rapidly as the great modern cities began to grow in the opening years of the nineteenth century. It was constantly visited by the then Emperor Maximilian, who brought with him in his train more men of great learning, of great influence, and of great taste. Small wonder, then, that the plastic arts flourished.

They flourished because in the first place there was what we call nowadays "a great demand," and in the second place because the new influence that was

abroad in the world, the new leaven, a sort of new impatience, the eternal *aliquid novi ex Italiâ* which exercised and always exercises so potent and so disturbing an influence upon the Germanic races—this great new impatience that we call the Renaissance had set, in Augsburg, all sorts of fingers itching to do great things with the reed-pen of the scholar, the brush of the painter, the style of the engraver. There was in Augsburg a Painters' *Zunft*, a sort of painters' and glaziers' guild, that had offered to it as much work as its members could well compass. It had its own Guild Hall in the market-place, where its members could meet, discuss and learn from the new wood-engravings, the new printed books, and all the new things that came to them so plentifully. The members of this guild designed windows, decorations for houses, dagger-sheaths, and costumes for pageants. Those of them who were more purely painters painted sacred pictures, Stations of the Cross, Apotheoses, and scenes from the lives of patron saints of the great abbeys. When, a little later, the Emperor took up a nearly permanent residence in Augsburg, he employed not only most of the Augsburg painters, but many foreign artists, even Dürer himself, to make historical and religious designs for him.

The father of Holbein was a member of the *Zunft* and no doubt enjoyed a certain share of the patronage which fell upon it. But, if we may hazard inferences, he was not among the most popular of the painters; he was not employed by the Emperor, though his comrade Hans Burgkmair worked along with Dürer. He seems, however, to have had his fair share of religious paintings to execute. Thus in St. Catherine's Convent towards 1509 he painted the *Basilica des heiligen Petrus*, beside Burgkmair's *Basilica des heiligen Kreuzes*. Nevertheless the few records that we have

of his life in the town records in Augsburg point to the fact that he was in chronic poverty. Thus he was frequently more than a year in arrears with his town-rates ; he was sued for butcher's meat. And the last sad record that we have of him was that his furniture was sold at the suit of his brother Sigismund Holbein for non-payment of a small debt.

Perhaps we may comfort ourselves with the thought that he was ahead of his time. The few pictures of his still extant, such as the *St. Sebastian* in Munich, show him to have been a painter of no small skill and an observer of the very highest. And the marvellous collection of portraits of his comrades and colleagues in his sketch-book, now in the Berlin National Gallery, is in no sense inferior to the Windsor Castle series of sketches for portraits of his son. There are the same firmness of line, the same perfection of drawing, the same intense individuality, the same free and consummate putting of a head on paper, and an even greater insight into character. One is tempted to theorize too far ; but it would seem as if the comparatively obscure father had had granted to him by reason of his misfortunes a greater sympathy, a greater insight, as if by tribulation he became more of a poet than his son who grew prosperous and had, as was the lot of painters in those days, the cities and the potentates of the earth contending for his favours.

His sympathy for Renaissance decorations appears to have been a zest as childlike and self-abandoned as that which his son showed in his early years. And it is probable that this taste rather than much actual skill in painting was all that Holbein the younger learned directly of his father. He inherited, however, his father's temperament, to which he added an incomparable skill in painting that was all his own.

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When he was seventeen, or eighteen at any rate, he left his father's house, and eventually reached Basle towards 1515.

He made his wander-year apparently with his elder brother Ambrosius, himself a painter of no mean order. Of where they went we have no trace, but that they did not come straight to Basle is apparent enough. For in 1514 a *Domherr* of the Minister at Constance ordered from him a *Madonna and Child*, which, after having lain undiscovered until 1876 in the village of Rickenbach near Constance, is now in the Holbein Collection at Basle.

This charming and naive little picture shows us what were the attainments of Holbein when he had left his father's studio and had not yet come under the influences that were then to be felt in Basle. He painted it probably in payment for his lodging, or received in return a few small coins, just as wandering organ repairers, wandering tailors, shoemakers, and tinkers have in Germany, for so many centuries since, kept themselves going from town to town, picked up a knowledge of the world, and learned new secrets of their crafts. It shows us a Holbein who was already at seventeen a consummate Renaissance decorator. The little cherubs who climb upon the painted frame, who blow instruments, who offer votive tablets, the painted frame itself, and the garlands of laurel leaves which hang down behind the Virgin's head, these are done with a perfectly sure touch and a wonderfully grasped knowledge of what it is possible to do with conventionalized babies' figures. But the moment the boy came to paint the real baby in its mother's arms he grew timid, uncertain, and what nowadays we call "amateurish." The head is too large, the eyes out of line, and the flesh painted with a curious little woolly touch. The conception

and pose of the Madonna are, as I have said, naive and tender, and the feeling of the whole picture is excellent. It is mostly perhaps in the feet of the Christ-child that we see any foreshadowing of the great draughtsman and the great realist that he was subsequently to become. So equipped, then, did Holbein leave his father's house. He had learned what it is open to most boys of genius to learn—the attractive and perhaps flashy conventionalities that were available. Possibly his father cared more for this side of his own influence, and neglected, as many artists neglect, his own real genius. He may, in fact, never have influenced his son towards Realism, or, on the other hand, his son may not have cared for it. At any rate, as far as we can judge, Holbein matured much more slowly in the direction of the gift for which to-day we most honour him.

[It must be remembered that biographical details regarding Holbein are largely conjectural and more than largely controversial. It is perfectly possible that Holbein did not make, strictly speaking, a " wander year " at this time, for there is very good evidence to support the idea that his father, and indeed his whole family, moved at about this time from Augsburg to Lucerne. Confusion constantly arises at about this time between Holbein the younger and his father. For instance, it is difficult to be certain whether the Hans Holbein who became a citizen of Lucerne and a member of the Painters' Guild there, and the Hans Holbein who in the same year was fined for brawling in Lucerne—whether that Hans Holbein were the elder or the younger. Some theorists hold that the younger Hans aided his father in the great *St. Sebastian* picture. But there is little evidence, either historic or plastic, to support this. I am,

however, scarcely concerned with the historic facts of Holbein's career. It may be taken as fairly certain that Holbein the younger did paint this Madonna, and probably at Constance—for it is unlikely that the Domherr Johann von Botzenheim would have sent to Lucerne a commission to a boy of seventeen or eighteen. At any rate we may accept the picture as some sort of evidence of what at that date was Holbein's technical ability. We may infer that he had then left his father's studio, whether at Lucerne or Augsburg, and that very probably he was on his way to Basle.]

III

WE find Holbein next for certain at Basle, where in the year 1515 Leo X's "Breve ad Erasmum" appeared in the third edition, published by Johannes Frobenius with a title-page designed by Holbein.

The Switzerland that Holbein first knew resembled the Japan of the day before yesterday. It was just receiving the new tide—the tide equivalent to that of the Japanese Western civilization. Basle itself was essentially a Germanic town, though by this time only officially a city of the Empire.

Its institutions, its faith, its art, and its literature were still generally Gothic or Teutonic. But the other tide which we call the Renaissance had already begun to reach Basle, if not to affect the laws, the institutions, or the people of the city.

The tide was, as it were, definitely attracted to her by the artists, and more particularly by the great printers, who were themselves assuredly great artists. Frobenius and Amerbach were already what we might call the official printers of the Humanists. The greatest of them all, Erasmus, a man of universal fame, had at that time just left France. He had appeared at the printing-house of Frobenius, and in 1515 was already sharing with him the house "*Zum Sessel am Fischmarkt*," to which the young Holbeins must have gone as designers seeking work.

But when Holbein first came to Basle, the New

Learning was still a thing existing mostly for the lettered classes, and the new faith, if it had there made progress at all, manifested itself mostly in an uneasy discontent amongst the lowest people.

Holbein's first visit to Basle appears to have been of quite short duration ; possibly it lasted for a year and a half. The most usual German theory is that, with the idea of qualifying himself for a member of the Basle Guild "*Zum Himmel*," he apprenticed himself to a Basle painter. He then, the theory proceeds, executed various pieces of supervised painting. Supposing this to have been the case, he would merely have supplied colour to designs made or generally indicated by his master. The extreme German theorists go so far as to identify the master with Hans Herbster, the painter ; this on the strength of the fact that one of the Holbeins painted a portrait of Herbster in 1516.

We may accept these theories or not, but the point is, to what extent, if any, the teaching of this suppositive master affected Holbein's technical abilities ? In the Basle Museum there is a series of pictures of the Passion of Christ, which presents one with serious problems of thought. In the first place there appears to be comparatively little doubt that the pictures are actually by Holbein. Holbein's friend Bonifacius Amerbach in after years made a careful collection of all the Holbein pictures and drawings that he could lay his hands on. This collection forms the nucleus of the fine series of Holbeins now in the possession of the town of Basle.

In Amerbach's own catalogue *The Last Supper* of this series is called : *Hans Holbeins erster Arbeiten eine*, meaning roughly "This is one of H. H.'s first works." A precisely similar note is appended to the entry regarding the picture of the scourging of Christ.

These two works both belonged to Amerbach. The Basle authorities have since added to them three other works, obviously by the same painter, and obviously of the same series—*Christ on the Mount of Olives*, *The Betrayal of Christ*, and *Pilate Washing his Hands*.

These large, ugly, but very forcible and very dramatic paintings on linen do not fit in very easily into the sequence of Holbein's other paintings. I mean that supposing we take the first *Virgin and Child* (1514) and the portrait of Amerbach (1519) as definite and assured landmarks in the progress of Holbein's technique, the painter must have made a very serious deviation to arrive at the peculiar region of coarse painting, harsh colour, and abrupt and violent attitudes in which there could have existed these conceptions of a Passion. It is as if he must have been drawn out of his straight course by some peculiar attraction. Dramatic as some of his later designs may have been, not one of them is so violent, or so brutal, as the *Scourging*, not one of them so vividly represents arms in the actual swing of their descent. Thus both in conception and in execution Holbein would appear to have been under an influence that was not his father's, that was not a product of his own evolution.

On the strength of Amerbach's notes, then, we may accept the Passion series as Holbein's work; on the strength of the works themselves we may well believe that in these years he did actually work in the studio of some Basle artist of a considerable personality of his own. As far as the paintings themselves are concerned, we may also actually believe that Holbein merely completed the designs of a master who reached considerably further back into the regions of style.

For the *Scourging at the Pillar* has no exuberant Renaissance decorations of any kind: there are a bare brick wall, a bare pillar, a bare tiled floor, a naked

figure. The scourgers are dressed in contemporary costume; their breeches are slashed, their shoes enormous, their hair cut after the fashion of Holbein's own time. There does not in fact appear to have been any room in this design for the peculiar personality of Holbein. It is, as it were, a rather barbaric conception that draws its being from an older generation. This *Scourging* is the first of this series. In the subsequent pictures Holbein seems gradually to assert himself. In the *Last Supper* the figures of the Saviour and the Apostles may well have been indicated by another master. But the decorations at the back of the table are already once more Renaissance improvisations. There are the bases of marble columns, and an arched door decorated with the inevitable cherubs. It is as if the master had left at the back of his design a blank space which the pupil filled up with fancies after his own heart.

The fact that these pictures are painted on linen indicates that they were not intended for permanent preservation. They were probably ordered for some Church feast in the neighbourhood, and this may account for their slapdash painting.

They were in fact journey-work, and it was to journey-work that Holbein devoted himself during these years of his first stay in Basle. He designed title-pages, such as that to the "Breve ad Erasmum," and that to the Basle edition of Sir Thomas More's "Utopia." He painted the tops of tables and the small heads of saints to fill in niches in houses. Two of these last are also in the Amerbach Collection at Basle. In Amerbach's catalogue they are described as being next to the Passion pictures "*die frühesten Werke des jüngern Holbein*," and these indeed would seem to show us the young Holbein getting back into what was later so very much his own country. The

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Sketch for Portrait of Meier's Wife

(Basle).

one, a *Head of a Virgin*, crowned, naive, and not very skilfully painted from some model, is much more actual in conception than any of the Passion pictures, and it is much more within the limits of its painter's capacity. It is a more personal work. And if the *Head of a Saint* commonly called St. John the Evangelist is somewhat sentimentalized, there is no reason why a boy, painting in piously Catholic times, should not sentimentalize the most mystical of the evangelists.

What one would wish to emphasize is the fact that there were three or more definite strains of influence at work in the pictures of this date. There was the extreme violence of *The Scourging*. This we shall find later again in the series of designs for stained glass, also a Passion series. This violence may have been part of Holbein's exuberant youth, or it may have been part of the inheritance of his age—an age which desired to see violent scenes rendered violently. We see the same sort of brutality of conception, tempered, however, by a decorative quality that Holbein's early pictures had not, in the works of the Augsburg master, Jörg Breu the elder. The common people demanded violent renderings of sacred narratives: the priests were ready to supply the demand by commissioning such paintings.

Holbein himself, as we shall see later, was never above doing his best to supply a demand. He was much more a craftsman in our modern sense of the term than a self-denying "artist" such as we now clamour for. His business was to obtain work first, and for this reason he strove to please his customers. That he had any more mystical ideals of the functions of an artist we have no means of telling.

We know, too, that what delighted him was Renaissance decoration, and this was a plastic delight, a personal taste, rather than an influence from without.

And, deeper down in the boy, at the very heart of the rose as it were, there was slumbering the deep, human, untroubled, and tranquil delight in the outward aspect of humanity, in eyes, in lips, in the form of hair, in the outlines of the face from ear to chin. This delight in rendering produced the matchless series of portraits of his later years which for us to-day are "Holbein."

Personally I seem to see these strains very clearly in the work of that date. Thus at the one extreme we may put the Passion pictures of 1515, and at the other the portraits of Jakob Meier and his bride Dorothea Kannegiesser—and in between them an *Adam and Eve*, of 1517. The Passion pictures are violent; the heads of saints are timidly idealized, but painted direct from models. The portraits of the Bürgermeister and wife are simply portraits. But the *Adam and Eve* is, as it were, dramatic portraiture; it forms the stepping-stone between the Passion series and the portraits. The look upon the face of the Eve, as if, having tasted the fruit, she had found it very bitter, the contorted attitude of the Adam, his eyes gazing upwards as if cringing before omnipotent wrath—these are at once dramatic in the sense of having been invented, and real in the sense of having been observed. One cannot ask more of a subject-picture—except that it should be well drawn and painted.

In this sense, too, the *Adam and Eve* lies between the Meier portraits and the Passion pictures. It is not so coarsely painted as the big pictures, it is not so flatly "washed in" as the portraits, which latter are painted as if Holbein were trying to develop for himself a method of painting portraits in oil which was simply the same as that of his first sketches for the portraits themselves.

This method he had certainly learned from his father, and it is as if he had preserved his precious secret beneath all the noise and display of his Basle master's teaching, or of the demands made upon him by the Basle crowds.

In his portraits his method was the same throughout his life. He made a silverpoint outline of his sitter—put in light washes of colour on the face; just indicated the nature of ornaments; made pencil notes of furs, orders, or the colour of eyebrows; and then took his delicate sketch home with him to work out the oil picture probably from memory.

The Meier portraits we may thus regard as being the first of the great Holbeins. The sketches and the paintings themselves may both be seen in the Basle Museum, and it is interesting to see how Holbein elaborated the costume of Dorothea, whilst he simplified the painting of her face. And in these portraits once more the Renaissance decorations fill in the picture and complete the composition.

In his latest and greatest portraits Holbein dispensed almost entirely with these decorations. The figure was there, and nothing else. And it is a matter for speculation whether the young Holbein painted them to satisfy himself or his customer. He had, as I have said, his customer always very clearly before his mind's eye, and even so late in life as on his second visit to England he painted the celebrated "display" portrait of George Gisze to show the German merchant of the Steelyard what he could do. Thus, no doubt, we may regard the elaborated painting of Frau Meier's jewelled smock as being in the nature of an attempt to get further orders.

Outside the realm of pure painting, Holbein certainly did do his best to get further orders. Thus we may account for the celebrated production called

Hans Bär's Table. Here not only are all manner of painted quips and cranks, such as a depiction of that "nobody" who does all the mischief, but various objects are supposed to lie on top of the pictures themselves, so that the beholder may be tricked into picking them up. The work is not of any particular importance, but the *Schoolmaster's Signboards* of 1515 are naive and rather charming serious attempts at painting. If they are not as good in their way as the Meier portraits, they are—these two little designs—quaint and actual in a high degree: a proof, if any were needed, that Holbein observed very closely the life of the people around him. They are like little Hogarths in their bareness, their selection of towels, handwashing fountains, and—if one cares to read in these pictures a story—in their portrayal of the Industrious and the Idle Scholar.

Thus at the end of his first visit to Basle we may regard Holbein as having done a certain amount of journey-work; as having come in the capacity of a printer's workman into connexion with the great Humanists; and as remaining most probably a follower of the Old Faith along with the greater portion of the population of this city of Basle. He appears to have returned to Lucerne in 1516–17, and there, as I have said, either he or his father entered the Guild of Painters, and either he or his father had to pay a fine for brawling.

IV

HE reappears only intermittently until the year 1519, when he is once again to be found at Basle, and has by that time become a real master. Of what happened in the meantime the great historians can do little more than conjecture. We know that in Lucerne in 1517 he decorated both the inside and outside of Jakob von Hertenstein's house. It is conjectured that he settled in Altdorf, because in the background of one of his designs there appear buildings somewhat resembling those of Altdorf. It is conjectured also that he travelled in Italy, because the façade of the Hertenstein house is copied direct from Mantegna's *Triumph*, whilst his *Last Supper* of a certainly later but uncertain date is copied almost as directly from Leonardo's. None of these three theories can be supported by evidence that would be in the least good in a court of law, for Mantegna engravings were extremely common in Switzerland at that time; Leonardo's works were frequently copied, and the copies distributed about the world, whilst Altdorf is near enough to Lucerne for Holbein to have made a sketching journey so far. On the other hand, the intercourse between Switzerland and Italy was extremely close; the Swiss poured down from their mountains in considerable numbers and very frequently, and Holbein's own patron, Meier, had led Swiss troops down into the Lombard plain. Thus Holbein may without the least stretch of probability have gone into

Italy either on his own account or at the desire of some patron.

The extent to which the Swiss preoccupied the minds of the Italians is proved by the fact that Machiavelli, in writing of the ancient Roman military genius, modelled his accounts of their evolutions on the exploits of the Swiss invaders. On the other hand, the influence of the Italian painters on the Swiss and German masters is extremely easy to trace and frequent of occurrence at this date. The earlier Basle masters, such as that great man Conrad Vitz, were more directly under the influence of the Van Eycks, of the Meister von Flémalle, and of the Flemish masters generally. But such painters as Hans Fries and Jörg Breu the elder in the *Samson* series to which I have already referred were very obviously inspired by Italians.

Thus in the *Samson* series whole motives, figures, and incidents are "lifted" directly from Italian engravings and *nielli*. In this they followed the fashion of their age, just as our own Elizabethan sonneteers translated directly from Petrarch. And Holbein, in copying Mantegna, was no doubt perfectly justified in his own mind.

He was no doubt perfectly justified too by the custom of his age in decorating, as he did, the houses of his time. He painted sham porticoes, sham steps, sham garden walls, and an innumerable quantity of sham architectural devices, both internal and external, filling up the interstices with pictures of the Seasons, of the Greek divinities, or of dogs and peasants. We may nowadays accept *Sapor the King of the Persians*, or *Leaia biting out a tongue:* we may accept in fact the pictures. But the sham architecture we must needs call bastard, holding that a wall must look like a wall of honest brick if it be made of brick; or stone, not

marble, if it be made of stone ; or wood if it be wood. The artist in fact has to respect his materials and must consider that a painted pillar, however much it may look like a pillar, is an unspeakable sin.

Holbein took the world as he found it, did what he was asked to do, and did it a great deal better than anyone else, and to condemn him would be as unprofitable and as unjust as to abuse Sir Thomas More for making it his proudest boast, for having it inscribed on his tomb, to flaunt in the face of all posterity, that he was *hæreticis molestus.*

Taking it, then, for granted that Holbein, with the innocence of a child doing what it sees others do, took part in a movement that was to lead architecture eventually down into the unsoundable Avernus that it has at present reached, we may concede to the cartoons for these fresco-designs merits which on the strength of their achievements alone would place Holbein among the great masters. Their composition is forcible, the line is flowing, the drawing of figures nearly always exactly observed and vigorously rendered, whilst they are still conventional enough to be very largely decorative. It is while he was in the full flood of producing these and similar designs for coloured glass that we take him up once more in the city of Basle.

Going back there he must have found the state of affairs in externals very similar to that of the Basle he had left. Only the shadows of the approaching changes were deepening. He found his brother Ambrosius still at work designing initials and title-pages for the printers, or designing dagger-sheaths and gold bands for goldsmiths. One of these goldsmiths, George Schweiger, himself, like the young Holbein, from Augsburg, had been Ambrosius' sponsor into the Guild which included painters, surgeons, and barbers, "*Zum Himmel.*"

His portrait by Ambrosius has in its way merits as great as those in any of the earlier portraits of Holbein himself; that is to say, that what it lacks in depth of painting it makes up in a sort of flat decorative look and in a poetic rendering that suggests the influence of Dürer. But on the whole we know very little of either the career or the talents of Holbein's elder brother. There is another small painting in the Basle Museum which suggests the influence of Dürer. This is called *Christus als Fürbitter*—Christ interceding before God the Father. In this not very well composed design the figure of the Saviour is copied directly from the title-page of Dürer's *Greater Passion*, whilst the ring of angels above the head of the Christ appears to have been suggested by the little Dürer drawing called *A Dance of Monkeys* which formed part of the Amerbach Collection, and is now in the Basle Museum. If this be the case Ambrosius must have lived till 1523.

Ambrosius, and no doubt Holbein himself, belonged to a little group of Suabians of whom there were then a considerable number in Basle itself. They were mostly artists who were attracted thither by the work offered. The books decorated with woodcuts and initials, for which Basle was so celebrated, were exposed for sale in great quantities in the yearly markets. And it should be remembered that Amerbach the printer was himself a Suabian. If we take into account the fact that the most intimate Basle friend of Holbein was Bonifacius Amerbach, the son of the printer, we may conjecture that it was to Amerbach the Suabian, rather than to Frobenius, that the two Holbeins first applied in coming to Basle. At any rate, through one or the other printer, Holbein came under the notice of the great Erasmus and under the influence of the Humanists. He was admitted to the "*Zunft zum*

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Holbein's Portrait of Himself.

Putative (Basle).

Himmel" in September 1519, and in July 1520 he became a citizen of Basle in order to qualify himself for practising there as a master. And probably at about the same date and for the same reasons he married a widow with two children.

He was then aged twenty-three. Some doubts have been thrown upon the portrait of himself, a chalk drawing of about this date, which is at present No. 66 in the catalogue of the Basle Museum. It descends from the Amerbach Collection. The inscription at present underneath it runs: "*Imago Pict. celeberr. Johann Holbein, ejusdemque opus.*" But this inscription is of later date. The objection taken to the picture is that the note in Amerbach's catalogue may be taken to mean "a likeness" either "of" or "by" Holbein, the German word *von* having both meanings. Tradition, however, translates the *von* "of," and tradition is frequently of enough weight to send down an equal balance.

The likeness, which is a masterly piece of pastel work, is so like the mental image of the man that one forms from his works, that one may accept it as a portrait and retain it privately in one's mind as an image. It is the head of a reliable and good-humoured youth, heavy-shouldered, with a massive neck and an erected round head—the head of a man ready to do any work that might come in his way with a calm self-reliance. The expression is entirely different from that in, say, Dürer's portrait of himself; from the nervous, intent glare and the somewhat self-conscious strained gaze. Holbein neither wrote about his art nor about his religion—nor, alas! did he sign and date every piece of paper that left his hand. He was not a man with a mission, but a man ready to do a day's work. And the intent expression of his eyes, which calmly survey the world, suggests nothing so much as

that of a thoroughly efficient fieldsman in a game of cricket who misses no motion of the game that passes beneath his eyes, because at any moment the ball may come in his direction.

Dürer signed each of his works, because a friend in early life suggested that in that way he should follow the example of Apelles. He added to his drawings inscriptions such as: "This is the way knights were armed at this time," or "This is the dress ladies wore in Nüremberg in going to a ball in 1510," as if he were anxious to add another personal note to that which the drawings themselves should carry down to posterity: as if he were anxious to make his voice heard as well as the work of his hands seen. Holbein once in painting a portrait of one of his supposed mistresses implies that he himself was Apelles. He calls her *Laïs Corinthiaca*, and Laïs of Corinth was the mistress of the great Greek painter. But he scarcely ever added notes to his designs, and he never seems to have troubled about his personality at all.

The eyes of his own portrait are those of a good-humoured sceptic, the eyes of Dürer those of a fanatic. Dürer attempted to amend by his drawings the life of his day; Holbein was contented with rendering life as he saw it. Dürer, after having plunged into the waters of the Renaissance, abandoned them self-consciously—because it was not right for a Christian man to portray heathen gods and goddesses. Holbein, if he gradually dropped Renaissance decorations out of his portraits, did it on purely æsthetic grounds. He continued to the end of his life to make Renaissance designs for goldsmiths, for printers, for architects, or for furniture makers. Dürer identified himself passionately with Luther, in whom he found an emotional teacher after his own heart. Holbein, in one and the same year, painted the *Meier Madonna* and designed

headpieces for Lutheran pamphlets so violent and scurrilous that the Basle Town Council, itself more than half-Lutheran, forbade their sale.

Holbein probably was endowed with the saving grace of humour. It is suggestive to find these two great artists as it were entangling their arts, meeting for a moment, and parting. Holbein, to while away some winter evenings in 1515, made a number of rough pen-drawings commenting upon rather than illustrating Erasmus' "Praise of Folly." These drawings were made in the margin of the book itself. Dürer had made a number of similar drawings in the margin of a copy of the New Testament. These drawings of Dürer's present striking resemblances to the others of Holbein's. Thus Dürer's *Folly* in cap and bells might well have formed the model for Holbein's *Folly leaves her pulpit.* And one of Holbein's sketches of a stag bounding through a wood appears to have been actually copied from Dürer's New Testament. Now Dürer was in Basle in 1515. Thus these two great men appear to touch hands for a second and, significantly enough, the one under the banner of the Lutherans, the other of the Humanists. These little drawings make Holbein, in 1515, touch hands too with the third very great man of his time.

The figure of Erasmus dominates of course those of all other associates of Holbein in the Swiss city of early days. His doctrine of gentleness and his humour, that extremists reasonably enough found trying, ultimately caused him to leave Basle. That city indeed resembled a hornet's nest by the year 1529, and his sharp and sardonic tongue had rendered him unpopular, as all observers must be unpopular amongst men of action. He hit off salient points too sharply; a quiet man, he resented the violent outcries of the Lutherans who ultimately became dominant in Basle.

He called, indeed, these outcries "tragedies," using the word in no complimentary sense, and, upon the occasion of the marriage of Œcolampadius the Reformer, he let fall the remark that "Lutheran tragedy always ends happily in weddings." Nevertheless it must have been an age that we may well envy—an age in which gentle irony, or irony of any kind, could make a man world-famous. For that was the fate of Erasmus. And, if Basle ultimately became too hot to hold him, it speaks nevertheless for the toleration of the Reformers that he should have been able to remain for so long amongst them, just as it speaks for the toleration of the upholders of the old faith that he should have been able with impunity to refuse at the end of his life a cardinal's hat.

His tongue appears to have spared no man—and, indeed, the earliest trace that we find of his association with Holbein is his little note against the drawing of a gross and fleshly character portrayed in the margin of the "Praise of Folly." Holbein had "labelled" another character "Erasmus": Erasmus set against the figure of a drunken boon companion the name of Holbein. I do not know that we need accept the fact as registering authentically the painter's drunken habits. In those days, when sages assailed each other with epithets of the most vile during learned quarrels of the most trivial dimensions, the mere hinting that a man was not extravagantly ascetic was little more than a friendly pat on the shoulder. We may indeed regard it as gratifying to those of us who are interested for Holbein that so immeasurably great a man as was the Erasmus of those days should, in that familiar vein of *tu quoque*, have acknowledged companionably the existence of a boy of eighteen who had made rough scrawls of genius in the margin of a book.

I have hardly room for a minute discussion upon

such subjects as to what degree did Holbein owe his classical education to his friendship with the author of the "Encomium Moriæ." Indeed we have no very valid evidence that any close friendship existed between the two men at this early date, and one's *a priori* ideas would seem to deny the probability. Later, of course, Holbein made several portraits of Erasmus—portraits of which that great man approved to the extent of sending them to friends by whom he wished to be remembered. But, for the rest, we must imagine that, in early days at all events, Holbein picked up merely such rule-of-thumb acquaintance with classical legends as must have been easily attainable in every alehouse and painters' guild of the Basle of that day. And, as far as his personal character is concerned, we may regard it as being satisfactory testimony that his friends, whatever the degree of their intimacy, remained friendly enough to patronize him—since the Humanist Erasmus who gibed at him in 1515 suffered himself to be painted until 1529, and the earnest and Catholic Burgomaster Jakob Meier who went to the boy for a portrait, commissioned, a decade or so later, the great *Meier Madonna* from a master whose orthodoxy must, by that time, have been rather less than suspect.

V

THE years from 1519, when Holbein returned to Basle, until 1526, when he first came to this country, must have formed a period of fairly steady and uninterrupted work. During that time he produced the following works which, for the sake of clearness of reference, I tabulate :

Paintings

Portrait of Bonifacius Amerbach, 1519.
The Last Supper.
The Freiburg Altarpiece (only wings remain).
The Basle Museum Altarpiece (Passion series).
Designs for organ-case.
Diptych : *Mater Dolorosa* and *Christ the Man of Sorrows.*
The Dead Man, 1521.
Two Saints (SS. George and Ursula), 1522.
The Zetter Madonna of Solothurn, 1522.
Portrait of Erasmus, 1523.
Venus
Laïs Corinthiaca } 1526.

* * * * *

The [putative] *Portrait of himself.* Coloured chalks. (*Circa* 1520–21.)

Various studies and drawings in the Basle Museum, many designs for stained glass, and the designs for wood-engravings, like the *Table of Cebes* (1522), the

Dance of Death series, an enormous number of initial letters, and the *Dance of Death* alphabet. And, among works of his which we know to have disappeared, there was, to mention one alone, the decoration of the Basle Rath-haus which occupied him for a considerable portion of the year 1521.

* * * * *

If Holbein had deliberately set himself to prove, in some one piece of painting, that he returned to Basle a master of portraiture, he could have offered to the citizens no better a proof than the portrait of Bonifacius Amerbach: and for its sweetness and charm the little picture might say to Holbein himself, *Ne excedas!* It may well have been his first painting on his return, for it is dated A.M.D.XIX. PRID. EID. OCT. —14th October. His reception into the "*Zunft zum Himmel*" had taken place on the 25th September. It offers, in its painting, more than any other fact of which we can get hold nowadays, an inducement to believe that Holbein had travelled, during the interval of his absence, in Italy, the land of friendly and brilliant colour.

I know of no more just epithets to apply to the blues, the reds, the whites, and the chestnuts of what is a small gem. If it have not the cherry red and the green of Botticelli, it has a gaiety in its scheme of contrasts, an, as it were, diaphanous effect of atmosphere, that neither Mantegna nor Da Vinci could much have bettered in the direction of light-heartedness. Such a sentence is perhaps gratuitous, but one is tempted to the utterance. For, when you compare the Meier portraits and this one, you are at once sensible that the Holbein who painted Amerbach has taken an immense stride in the direction of confidence. The Meier heads are still flattish in effect: indeed the oil paintings

are, as I have said, flatter even than the tinted sketches, as if the painter were a little afraid of his medium and were working within a convention, or a limit of his powers that he had perhaps learned from his father. But there is an end of that in the portrait of Amerbach.

I must leave it to the reader's preference to decide what exactly was the "eye-opener"—to use a vulgar word that is precisely just—Holbein had received in the interval. I do not myself see any particular evidence of the influences of Mantegna and Da Vinci: but, all the same, the sight, say, of the *Last Supper* may have "given him furiously to think." It may, I mean, have given him a shock that would prove a very definite impulse towards working out his own salvation, if not necessarily in terms of imitation of its painter.

Hard work, the sight of new skies, and a new atmosphere, the influence of foreign masters, or the mere desire to do his very best in a kind of "diploma" work—whatever it was that made this little work so luminous, made it also a touching record of a friendship with a very charming man. Perhaps, indeed, it was simply the glow of the friendship that communicated itself to the painting. This is not mere rhapsody: for the picture, if we did not know it to be the portrait of an intimate friend, would self-reveal itself as such. As a rule, Holbein cannot be called one of those painters who can claim to have painted the "soul" of his sitters. For there are some painters who make that claim: there are many who have it made for them. The claim is, on the face of it, rendered absurd by the use of the word "soul." One may replace it by the phrase "dramatic generalization," when it becomes more comprehensible. What it means—to use a literary generalization of some looseness—is that the painter is one accustomed to live with his subject

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The Dead Man (Basle).

for a time long enough to let him select a characteristic expression; one which, as far as his selection can be justified, shall be *the* characteristic, *the* dominant note, *the* "moral" of his sitter. The portrait thus becomes, in terms of the painter's abilities, an emblem of sweetness, of regret, of ambition, of what you will. The sitter is caught, as it were, in a moment of action.

Holbein hardly seems to have belonged to this class. He appears to have said to his sitter as a rule: "Sit still for a moment: think of something that interests you." He marked the lines of the face, the colour of the hair, a detail of the ornament—and the thing was done. It was done, that is to say, as far as the observation went.

If he wished to "generalize" about his subject, he did it with some material attribute, giving to *Laïs Corinthiaca* coins and an open palm, to *George Gisze* the attributes of a merchant of the Steelyard. I am not prepared to say whether the method of Holbein or that of the painters of souls is the more to be commended, but I am ready to lay it down that, in the great range of his portraits, Holbein, as a painter of what he could see with the eye of the flesh, was without any superior. Occasionally, as in the portraits of Erasmus in the Louvre, he passed over into the other camp and, without sacrificing any of his marvellous power of rendering what he saw, added a touch of dramatic generalization, or of action. This was generally a product of some intimacy with the sitter.

And it is perhaps this that makes the portrait of Amerbach so charming. It is as if Holbein had had, not the one sitting that was all so many of his later subjects afforded him, but many days of observation when his friend was unaware that he was under the professional eye.

In the course of a summer walk along the flowery meadows of the Rhine near Klein Basel—as the German hypothetic biographers are so fond of writing—perhaps Holbein glanced aside at his companion. Amerbach's eye had, maybe, caught the up-springing of some lark, and the sight suspended for a moment some wise, witty, slightly sardonic, and pleasantly erudite remark. Between the pause and the speech Holbein looked—and the thing was done.

Hypothesis or not, that is the general suggestion that the portrait makes, and its actuality, its accidental dramatic effect, lifts it up, just a little, above much work that he did after. That and the magnificent power of rendering that he had, lifted him above any level that he would have attained as a painter of "subject" pictures. For in the best of his subject pictures he showed a magnificent invention such as is characteristic enough of his race: in his finest portraits he showed an artistic insight—an imagination such as I am tempted to say has been given to no German before or since.

It shows itself next, most strongly, in the *Dead Man* of two years later (1521). As painting and drawing, this must remain one of Holbein's most masterly works. It is practically his sole important rendering of the nude, which otherwise seems little to have attracted him. But, carefully drawn and observed, dramatically lighted and rendered, it remains a permanent testimony to the fact that Holbein could observe and render anything. If he only very occasionally rendered the nude figure, it was because only very occasionally he had the opportunity—just as, though he seldom rendered animals, his little drawings of bats and lambs in the Basle Museum prove what masterly renderings of animals he was capable of; and just as the drawing of *Lanzknechts fighting*—

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St. Anne with the Virgin.

Design for Glass (Basle)

which assuredly is one of Holbein's most wonderful conceptions—or the design for the decoration in the Basle Town Hall, *Samuel declaring the anger of the Lord to Saul*, proves that he could observe what to-day we call " men of action " and render them realistically or decoratively.

The *Dead Man* is a frank piece of realism. The agonized, open mouth and the opened eyes add something to the horror of the visual conception, but they are all that Holbein added for the purpose of dramatization, and one may doubt to what extent they serve that purpose. Otherwise it is just a dead man. Its " literary " genesis and what it " means " remain mysteries. No doubt Holbein meant that each beholder should interpret it for himself ; each beholder must, at least, so interpret it. The inscription on the rock and the pierced side rudimentarily convert this dead man into a counterfeit presentment of the Man who died that death might cease. Nevertheless it remains open to us to doubt whether these attributions were more than an afterthought.

The subject of Death was one that very much preoccupied Holbein and his world. There were then, as it were, so many fewer half-way houses to the grave : prolonged illnesses, states of suspended animation, precarious existences in draught-proof environment or what one will, were then unknown. You were alive : or you were dead ; you were very instinct with life : the arrow struck you, the scythe mowed you down. Thus Death and Life became abstractions that were omnipresent, and, the attributes of Death being the more palpable, Death rather than Life was the preoccupation of the living.

In his most widely known designs Holbein, choosing the line of least resistance, shows us this abstraction with its attributes. Employing little imagination of

his own, he has lavished a felicitous and facile invention along with a splendid power of draughtsmanship upon an idea that could be picked up from the walls of almost every ale-house of his time. In the *Dead Man*, however, he takes a higher flight, showing us, not a comparatively commonplace abstraction, but nothing less than man, dead. It is the picture of the human entity at its last stage as an individual: the next step must inevitably be its resolution into those elements which can only again be brought together at the beginning of the next stage. It is the one step further—the painting of the inscription upon the rock and of the wound in the side—that identifies this man, dead, and trembling on the verge of dissolution, with that Man, dead, who died that mankind might go its one stage further towards an eternity of joy and praise. And, by thus turning a dead man into *the* Dead Man, Holbein performs, in the realm of literary ideas, a very tremendous fact with a very small exertion—for it is impossible to imagine a human being who will not be brought to a standstill and made to think *some* sort of thoughts before what is, after all, a masterpiece of pure art. It was that, perhaps, that Holbein had in his mind.

It may well be that he had nothing of the sort, and that having, as it were, exhausted, in the search for dramatic and melodramatic renderings of episodes in the life of Christ, every kind of violence that he could conceive of, he here comes out at the other end of the wood and—just as the Greeks ended their tragedies, not in a catastrophe, but upon a calm tone of one kind or another—so Holbein crowns his version of the earthly career of the Saviour with an unelaborated keystone. Or it may have been merely a product of his spirit of revolt. He may have been tired of supplying series after series of Passion pictures meant

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Christ Bearing the Cross.

Later Passion Series (Basle).

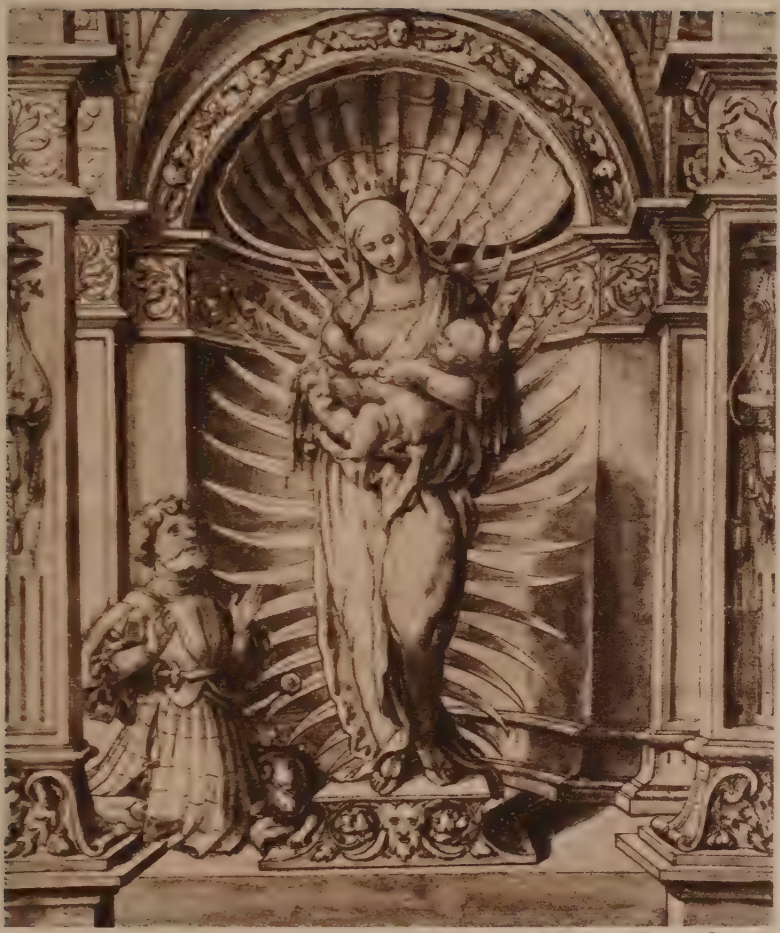
to satisfy the hunger of his time for strong meat in religious portrayals.

It was this appetite that caused the existence of the number of works in the Basle Museum—works which must make one a little regret that the Holbein who painted the portrait of Amerbach and the Dead Man had not a greater leisure, since, vigorous and splendid as so many of these conceptions are, they are yet upon a plane appreciably lower, whether we regard them as products of art or as "readings of Life," to use a cant phrase. In its present disastrously restored state it is difficult to regard, say, the early *Last Supper* as other than a rather uninspired piece of journey-work. Without the early Passion series on linen one would feel inclined to say that it was of doubtful ascription. It is interesting because it is one more of Holbein's designs that has been "lifted" from an Italian master, and because it shows Holbein pursuing a sort of pictorial realism to supply the craving for strong meat that I have mentioned. But in the demand for designs for coloured glass he found a refuge which tided him over dangerous years. It called forth, too, qualities which, if they were not amongst his very greatest, were yet sufficient to place him among the rare band of very great decorative artists. It is impossible to stand, in Basle Museum, before the series of designs—of *Madonnas*; of *St. Anne with the Virgin and the infant Jesus*; of the charming little, short-legged *St. Katharine* with the immense sword; of scenes from the life of Christ; of armorial bearings for a family or for a city; or of drawings that, apparently, were made in speculation to form part of the glass-worker's "stock" designs—it is impossible to consider this immense outpouring of facile and wonderful work without saying that here was a great and vivid personality, carrying on, side by

side, within himself two opposed but overpowering strains of artistic tendency—and carrying them together to ends so high that at the last they seem hardly to conflict.

In his later portrait work he attained to a region more serene and more valuable: but then he trod upon ground less dangerous. Speaking from the outside and in the language of such abstract principles as we have, we might say that to introduce realistic parts into decorative designs was to commit the unspeakable sin against first principles. Yet almost every drawing of the *Passion Series* has a decorative "look" of its own. It is, firstly, a thing pleasant for the eye to rest on—which is the final end of decoration, however attained. It is only secondarily that one becomes aware that each drawing is an even violent portrayal of scenes in the life of a man, despised, rejected, and given up to the brutalities of a mob whose vilenesses Holbein no doubt had ample means of observing in the streets around. But, as I have said, the men brandishing whips, the men shaking fists, shouting, and pulling their faces into grimaces of vomiting disgust—even the naked figure at the pillar, the blindfold figure with its bound hands, and the thorn-crowned man staggering beneath the heavy cross—all these observed and rendered actualities are the secondary matter: the design in its entirety is the thing.

How, exactly, it is done is easy enough to say; the Renaissance architecture dwarfs the figures, subordinates them, brings them into place and gives "the look" to the design. But how the conception could have come into the master's head is not so easy to discover—nor yet to say how great a master it was that could subordinate so magnificent a power of actual observation and realistic rendering—a thing that



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The Kneeling Knight,

Design for Glass (Basle).

weaker men of the one sort would have ridden to death —to a power so great of conceiving decorative surroundings, a power that weaker men of the other sort would have ridden to a death even worse. Yet Holbein kept his teams wonderfully in hand, and the grotesque peasants of the *Holdermeier Arms* or the men in the boat of the *Arms of the City of Basle* are no less parts of an harmonious and beautiful design than are, say, the intrinsically "pretty" Virgin and child of the woodcut *Patron Saints of the City of Freiburg*. It is only very occasionally, as in the *Nailing on the Cross*, that a figure—in this case that of the Christ—ever seems to "stick out" of the design. It does this probably because of a certain crudeness of realization, just as, in the direction of prettiness, the charming little figure of St. Katharine or the charming little group of St. Anne and the Virgin "stick out" of their respective designs. Nevertheless, none of these drawings are "realistic" in the sense that the drawings of the bat, or the *Lanzknechts*, are actual. They have, very admirably, an effect of being drawn, as it were, from highly "realistic" bas-reliefs; the wash-drawings giving robes and even faces a sort of general look of being carved in marble. And this, also, gives them a touch of aloofness; it renders them convincingly decorative.

How admirably these designs were suited to their purpose anyone may see who will take the trouble to visit the church of St. Theodore in Klein Basel, where the *Kniender Ritter* design—oddly enough without the *Ritter*—is carried out in coloured glass. This absence of the design's particular Hamlet, the dedicator, gives one a certain amount of matter for thought. For, admirable as the designs are, they show how once more, in the realm of decorative art, Holbein stood at the parting of the ways and initiated practices

that, if they were saved from viciousness by his own transcendant genius, yet pointed the way downwards towards a slough of despond that we have not yet come to the other side of.

For, just as in frescoing houses Holbein placed himself above the architect, so, in the matter of stained glass, he divorced himself from the glass-maker. The earlier designers had been the actual makers of the glass, and, later, they had at least worked in the shadow of the church that they intended to decorate. Their designs were made for that church and for a definite window in that church. Holbein made merely "stock" designs that any glass-maker might buy and set up in any building. Thus his shields on designs for armorial windows were left bare—and thus the *Stifter* of the *Ritter* design was just a dummy figure that might be put in or left out.

It is no doubt the case that the mediæval guild system, which in the time of Holbein had reached its sternest developments, was largely responsible for this. No one, save members of the glaziers' guild, might meddle with stained glass, and thus the designer became of necessity alienated. The same was true of wood-engraving in an almost more lamentable degree, and we have bitter reasons to regret that the Holbein who made many and excellent designs for wood-engravings did not himself cut the blocks, so that it is only occasionally, as when an engraver of genius like the mysterious Lützelberger was set to cut part of the designs for the *Dance of Death*—it is only thus occasionally that we can see what wood-engravings after Holbein's designs might have been. Except accidentally we cannot, of course, see the designs themselves—but from the results we can judge that Holbein the designer, either by study or by native genius, had mastered the essentials of such design and

knew just what a good wood-engraver could do, and just what his limitations must be. And, of course, we may shudder to think what we should have lost had Lützelberger never existed.

I will return to the subject of wood-engravings when, later, I treat of the Dance of Death series, the publication of which was by accident deferred for a decade or so. I have found it convenient to mention the designs for coloured glass, which must have occupied at least the odd moments of many years. And it is not very easy to place them with any chronological exactness or to let them fall into place in between the oil paintings as if they were the palings of a fence between the heavier uprights. Indeed chronology is a thing of no great avail to anyone dealing with the work of Holbein in these particular years of his career. It is far easier to divide his works up into compartments according to their "look." In that way we get the portrait of Amerbach (1519) and the *Dead Man* (1521) as the supporting parts of the fence. Without troubling too much as to their relative sizes or values we may class the Freiburg Altarpiece and the Basle Altarpiece, the Diptych, *Mater Dolorosa*, and *Man of Sorrows*, and the designs for the organ-case of Basle Minster as being, along with the designs for coloured glass, the rails that make up the fence. Further along the road to 1526 the fence is supported by the *Zetter Madonna*, the portrait of Erasmus of 1523, and the Dorothea Offenburgs of 1526.

The Basle Altarpiece (No. 14 in the Basle Collection) consists of eight separate representations of incidents in the Passion of Christ. By means of extraneous scroll work and the shape of the whole they are linked together so as to form an architectural rather than a decorative unity. The entire work has, however, been so harshly and glaringly restored that, except in the

form of a good reproduction, it is difficult to get any real pleasure from it. In such a reproduction there stand out at once the remarkable vividness of the realization and the skilful way in which, composition blending into composition, unity and balance are secured for the whole work. The figure of the Christ on the Mount of Olives seems to lead the eye naturally to the Judas, who delivers his kiss in the centre of a crowd, beneath the shadow of lances and pikes ; the armed crowd passes again, as if it were part of the same procession, into the crowd, still armed and topped with pikes and lances, before Pilate's seat ; and this once more melts into the comparative solitude of the scourging. Almost precisely the same effect is carried out in the designs of the lower panels.

No doubt the exigencies of shape in the altarpiece account considerably for the line of these designs. The central picture of the Freiburg Altarpiece is missing, so that we have no means of judging whether in this work too Holbein followed out the same plan, but the tilted moon of the Nativity and its lighting, that proceeds apparently from the new-born child, prove how inveterately and how skilfully Holbein tempered the realism of his designs for the sake of decorative effect : the broken arches of the palace prove, in their case, how he modified his decorative conventions to some extent in order to suit his " literary " subject.

Paintings of such subjects must inevitably have been very much what musicians would call variations upon a given theme. The essential point—the theme —was the mother and child ; the rest was free fantasia, and it was hardly practicable for any artist to attempt to drive out of the spectator's mind all other renderings. That, in a " subject picture," is what the painter as a rule seeks to do. But there are too many Nativities,

so that the artist was driven to desire that the beholder should exclaim, not "How true!" but "How beautiful!" We have ample reason to believe that Holbein's idea of the beautiful was, at that date, a pricelessly ornamented Renaissance temple or palace: thus, in this Nativity, he welds together subject and beauty, producing the picture of a child born in a manger that has been set up in a ruined palace. And we may well exclaim: "How beautiful!"

We may equally well exclaim "How true!" before the little diptych (No. 13 of the Basle Museum), *Christ the Man of Sorrows* and *Mater Dolorosa*, two small paintings in shades of brown which have descended to the city of Basle from the collection of Amerbach. Here there is no attempt made to reconcile the two currents. The Man of Sorrows is even more forcibly set there than is the Dead Man, and it is as if in his vaster frame there had been more room for agony. We may, if we like, go out of our way to analyse the literary side of the picture; but whether we evolve the theory that this is Christ in the halls of Pilate before or after the scourging, or whether we regard the columns and arches as merely creations of Holbein's fancy to fill up the background and account for the glancing light—in whatever way we satisfy ourselves as to these details of small importance, this figure of the man must remain for us the one reading that we can carry about with us of that one side of one incident of a tremendous legend. Holbein does, when he addresses himself to it, drive home almost more than any other preacher the fact of the humanity of Christ. It is with him a man who suffers, not an amiable and distant divinity whose physical ills we may neglect to the pleasing sound of church hymns.

A busy man, Holbein was under the necessity of working quickly, and being neither a mystic nor a

sentimentalist, he struck swift and sure notes. There was in him very little of what Schopenhauer calls *Christo-Germanische Dummheit*; he came before it and before the date of angels who are conceived as long-haired, winged creatures in immaculate gowns—before the date of prettification, in fact. But, being a busy man, he was naturally unequal in his work, so that the figure of the *Mater Dolorosa* is neither so arresting nor so convincing as that of her son; and two such figures as the *SS. George and Ursula* of Carlsruhe, having been rather terribly overpainted, are hardly even interesting as conceptions, though the face and upper part of the body of the Ursula have a certain, almost mediæval charm. The curious obtrusion of the hips and bend of the knees suggest the attitudes of the ladies in Holbein's design for costumes, and would seem to prove that even so great a master had, at times, to let his taste be perverted so as to follow a fashion of the day or year. I mean that the citizens' wives of Basle, walking all round Holbein with a curious, distorted gait, seem, in this instance at least, to have persuaded him that this was an ideal attitude for the human form. It is interesting too to observe in these two figures that shortness of the legs which is so pronounced a characteristic of the master's earlier work.

I am inclined to regard the Hampton Court painting of the *Risen Christ* as being unjustly attributed to Holbein. The attitude of the Christ is, at the least, uncharacteristic of the painter, and the right arm of the Magdalen, the clumsy line of her shoulder, the stiffness of her drapery—the stiffness indeed of the whole design—are out of sympathy with any other paintings of the master's manhood, in which he distinguished himself almost invariably by a flow of line and composition of masses that carry the eye from side to side

of a picture. You do not, I mean, anywhere else see a rather clumsily outlined, stiff parallelogram of light in the centre of a composition, such as is here to be seen between the salient figures, nor indeed do you elsewhere get such another stiff parallelogram of light as is formed by the tomb with its slab rolled away. Holbein, however, was so extremely various in his conceptions, and the authorities who accept the painting as his work are so formidable in weight, as to make me speak with some diffidence; nevertheless, the longer I look at the rigid lines of the picture the more reluctant do I feel to accept it.

How various Holbein could be is proved immediately in 1522, the year which saw the production of the *SS. George and Ursula*. It saw also the birth of the *Virgin of Solothurn*, a picture so beautiful in itself that, when all the glamour of its recovery from a dishonoured ruin beneath painter's floor boards is allowed for, and when too all has been allowed for in the very careful and well-intentioned restorations that it necessarily underwent—when, in fact, everything that need be is allowed for, it remains one of the finest of Holbeins.

The germ of this design is to be found in the beautiful little woodcut on the reverse title-page of the "*Stadtrechte und Statuten der loeblichen Stadt Freiburg*." This was published in 1520 and seems to prove that Holbein carried about with him the ideas of favourite designs, and that, having, as it were, wasted this lovely little conception on an obscure woodcut, he wished once more to bring it gloriously into the daylight. This is perhaps merely a romantic way of putting the fact that, as many other busy painters have done, Holbein sometimes elaborated rough designs into finished pictures and that here we are able to identify a first design—to catch him in the

act. The woodcut I am inclined to think more charming in its spontaneity than is the design of the picture. It has at least a greater unity and more balance; for in the *Solothurn Virgin* the figure of St. Ursus of Thebes—a somewhat stiff and conventional creation—stands somewhat apart from the entwined group of the Virgin and St. Martin. The sinuous lines of their robes flow one into another; the up-and-down figure of the knight is slightly discordant in the whole composition. But, apart from this, and from the head of the suppliant which Holbein introduces as discreetly as is feasible, the picture is one of those very lovely conceptions about which it is difficult to say very much. There it is: you may look at it for an hour, for a morning, or for a day or so on end, and always with increasing satisfaction. It belongs, like all the best of Holbein's work, to a special class of picture. It is not immediately very striking either in lighting or in colour, either in dramatic gesture or astonishing painting. But there is no false drawing, as there is no exaggerated drawing, and there is neither false lighting nor false painting.

The whole mood of the picture, in inception as in execution, is one of entire tranquillity, so that the painted Virgin seems to be as sure of achieving a successful motherhood as was Holbein of turning out a masterpiece. That he was a very wonderful man is proved by his so wonderfully overcoming the conditions of the painting, since the vaulted and barred niche points to the fact that the picture was intended to fill a given and unlovely place, whilst the head of the suppliant would seem to prove that the picture was commissioned by some wealthy person with something on his conscience. And it must have meant either some skill in argument or some convicting power of personality that the artist should have been able to

save the unity of his little Freiburg design—that, in fact, he should have been able to persuade the donor to make so unobtrusive an appearance in the work.

The surprising adventures of the picture, identifications of the donor and even of the model for the Virgin, the strange circumstances of the discovery, of the never to be sufficiently praised industry of the recoverer—all these things are part of the legends of art, and add to the hopefulness of those romantic souls who dream of one day discovering inestimable art-treasures beneath the floors of their bedrooms or in deserted granaries. Inasmuch as such things prevent most of us from looking at a picture as a picture, making us produce mouths round with astonishment as if the object gazed at were a captive released from Barbary or some similar wonder, I dislike recounting them. But the faith and gallant doggedness of Mr. Zetter, who nosed out the picture from beneath dishonouring rubbish, are so worthy of celebration that I cannot refrain from referring such of my readers as care about the matter to Mr. Zetter-Collin's "*Die Zetter'sche Madonna von Solothurn : Geschichte und Originalquellen. Solothurn*, 1902." Here will be found recorded all the possible *ana* of the subject.

During this period—to be precise, from June 1521 until October 1522—Holbein was engaged upon one of those tasks which, along with the Hertenstein frescoes, the Bär table, and the "Dance of Death," remained for some subsequent centuries wonders of the world. This was the decoration of the council chamber in the Basle Rath-haus. The frescoes themselves have vanished, so that no man living has seen more than patches of colour upon the walls : the pictures are in that heaven of lost masterpieces where, perhaps, we may one day see the campanile of Venice, the arms of the Venus of Milo, or the seven-branched candle-

stick of the Temple of Solomon. Vigorous and splendid sketches remain, some copies and many descriptions—but these afford us very little idea of what may have been the actual effect of the decorations, as decorations.

Regarded theoretically they cannot have been perfect or even desirable : here again plain walls were made to look like anything else but walls. But no doubt they were very wonderful things whilst they still existed.

Nevertheless I cannot resist a feeling of private but intimate relief that these tremendous *tours de force* are left to our imaginings. We lose them—but we gain a Holbein whom we can more fearlessly enjoy. For, supposing these things with their nine days' wonder of invention that Holbein shared with many commoner men and set working for the gratification of every commoner man—supposing these extremely wonderful designs still existed, the far greater Holbein —the Holbein of the one or two Madonnas and of the innumerable portraits in oil or in silverpoint—the Holbein whose works place him side by side with the highest artists, in that highest of all arts, the art of portraiture—that tranquil and assured master must have been obscured. Those of us who loved his greater works must, in the nature of things, have been accused of paradox flinging : the great Public must have called out : " Look at that wonderful invention : that compassionate executioner with the magnifying glass, seeking to take out his victim's eye with as little brutality as might be ! " And beside that attraction the charms of Christina of Milan or all the sketches at Windsor would be praised in vain. We should have gained another Shakespeare rich in the production of anecdote, we might have lost some of our love for an artist incomparable for his holding the mirror up to the men and women of his wonderful age.

So that, one way with another, we may at least

Hanfstaengl

Portrait of a Man,

Called Sir Thomas More (Brussels)

console ourselves for the loss of these decorations in the thought that they no longer obscure what was the real and true greatness of a many-sided man. The decorations came to an end late in 1522, when only part of the council chamber was finished. Holbein, it is recorded to the honour of the city of Basle, had contracted to complete the work: but having been paid all the money due to him and having put into the room as much work as he deemed fitting or reasonable, he petitioned to be released from his bargain or granted a further sum for its completion. The councillors recognized his claims and, having at that date little money to spare, released the painter without giving a further commission.

The career of Holbein for the next year or so takes one of its characteristic dips into the sands of oblivion. Except for several portraits of Erasmus we have little or no actually dated matter to go upon. The very reasonable theory is that in or about 1523 he travelled into France, going apparently with the portrait that Erasmus was sending to Amerbach. The beloved Bonifacius was then studying at Avignon: perhaps the attractions of his society, perhaps the troublous times that made themselves felt rather early in Basle, caused Holbein to leave Basle and travel across France. We have one fairly certain trace of his itinerary in the little drawings from the painted monuments of the Duke and Duchess Jean de Berry in the cathedral at Bourges, which he must have visited. Perhaps, too, the fact that the *Dance of Death* was eventually published by the brothers Trechsel of Lyons would seem to prove that Holbein's history had repeated itself—that, even as in the first instance he had come to Basle in order to obtain work from the printer Frobenius, he had now come to the south of France on such another errand. Perhaps the mere

fact that Holbein found time to execute so many portraits of Erasmus—the Louvre portrait, the one in Basle, which is no doubt what Holbein carried to Avignon, the little round design cut in wood by Lützelberger, and the one for a diptych containing a companion portrait of Frobenius which has now disappeared—this fact of his executing so many portraits of the same great man might lead to the idea that his other sources of employment were failing. Indeed, of the years 1524–25 we find no signed traces whatever.

In 1523 the great troubles and upheavals that saw Rome herself sacked by Lutheran mercenaries were still comparatively at a distance. Writing of that year, one of the greatest of all the rather unsavoury politicians of that wonderful century sums up the topics that were then in men's minds: "By the space of xvii hole wekes . . . we communyd of warre pease Stryfe contencyon debatte murmure grudge Riches pouerte penury trowth falsehode Justyce equyte discayte oppreseyon Magnanymyte actyuyte force attempraunce Treason murder Felonye consyliacyon and also how a commune welth myght be edifyed and continuyid within our Realme. Howbeyt in conclusyon wee haue done as our predecessors haue been wont to doo that ys to say, as well as wee myght and lefte where we begann. . . . Whe haue in our parlyament grauntyd vnto the Kynges highnes a ryght large subsydye the lyke whereof was newer graunted in this realme."

The point about this letter, which is addressed to Cromwell's "especial and entyrelye belouyd Frende Jno Creke in Bilbowe in Biscaye," is precisely that at that date there was no burning question in England. Every possible subject was discussed with academic calmness, and the country appeared to be outside the

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Study for the Meier Madonna

(Basle)

European storm-centre. And such letters went all over Europe in these years, holding out the promise of a halcyon state to such workers as Holbein whose means of subsistence vanished in storms like that of the Peasants' War, and whose very works were destroyed out of all the churches of Protestantism. And not only in Protestant lands, since even such a Pontiff of the plastic arts as Michel Angelo was soon to find out that the Pontiff of the Church deemed it expedient to attend almost more to the affairs of his cure than to marbles, however deathless.

Of these bad times for artists we can find, as I have said, little or no trace in the career of Holbein—there are no pictures of his bearing the actual dates 1524 or 1525. It may be convenient therefore to speak here of the *Dance of Death* series and the *Death Alphabet*, although the Trechsels did not actually publish the former until many years had elapsed. This is another of Holbein's wonder-works. It achieved and maintained a European celebrity such as perhaps no other work of art ever did. The only parallels to it that occur at all immediately to one are Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" in Western, and the "Labyrinth" of Comenius in Eastern Europe; and these two appeal to a comparatively limited class of races, however widespread. It has struck straight at the hearts of innumerable races, at the hearts of the lowest of peasants as at those of the greatest of artists. It was carried by chap-book pedlars to the remotest hovels of the earth, and Rubens declared that from it he had his earliest lessons in drawing—just as the first master of Michel Angelo was, vicariously, Martin Schongauer.

It is easy to say that the appeal of the series came from its subject, and that its subject had been the common property of the mediæval centuries. Yet

the mere fact that of so many *Gesta Mortis* only this of Holbein's held the popular imagination with any lasting firmness, the fact that it was the selected version of all the versions, would go to prove that it was some sort of technical excellence, some sort of technical appeal that caused its apotheosis. And excellent indeed is almost every one of these woodcuts—excellent in the simplicity of design which recognizes so truly what the thick, unctuous line of the wood-engraver can do ; excellent in the placing of each little subject on the block ; excellent in the way in which each figure stands upon its legs ; and above all, excellent in the appeal to the eye, in the " composition " of each subject.

It is, of course, open to one to say that story-telling is the least of all the departments of designing. But when once such an artist as Holbein sets himself to tell a story, the matter becomes comparatively unimportant. He was so true to himself that his designs had the proper, the individual " look," whether he were putting on paper something so purely arbitrary as the design for a coat-of-arms, or the figure of Death driving a weapon through a soldier. The subject simply did not hinder him : he could employ any object so as to form an integral part of his decorative purpose. And, what is still more to the point, having set himself to tell a story, he did tell it with a quite amazing lucidity. The detail essential to his idea is always what strikes the eye first—or rather it is " led up to " as skilfully as in the *dénouement* of a good French *caste*. That is, of course, one of the lower merits : but that he took so much trouble over it is proof of how conscientious a worker he was—of how amply he deserved the enormous popularity that became his.

I have hardly space here to trace the evolution of

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The Meier Madonna (Darmstadt).

the idea of the *Todtentanz*. It originated, how far back we cannot tell, in a universal, and no doubt praiseworthy, religious desire of "rubbing in," to each mortal creature, the fact that he or she must die. It was a matter not merely of chalking upon, or carving out of, a wall: "Remember, O man, that thou art mortal"—a lesson that each reader, like each hearer of a sermon, was apt to apply rather to his neighbour than to himself. The framer or inventor of a *Todtentanz* wished to bring the moral home to each beholder, and in order to do this he exhausted his knowledge of the human avocations or estates. Thus a butcher who received a grim joy at seeing his friend the horse-merchant, the lacemaker, or the coney-catcher in the arms of a corpse, was expected to receive a shock and ensue no doubt a moral purging at the spectacle of the representation of all Butcherdom dancing in the embrace of a phantom ox-slaughterer. For, in the original conception of a *Todtentanz*, each man or woman danced, not with Death the Abstraction, but with a dead mortal of his own kidney. Of such "dances" there were many on the walls of cloisters all over Europe: at Basle itself there is still one to be seen—and no doubt such perpetrations and the fact that they were continually beneath the eyes of men during successive generations did have a considerable influence on the trend of thought. They must, I mean, have smitten very hard the poetic and imaginative few during their childhoods. Perhaps to them may be ascribed the continual preoccupation of the mind of Montaigne with one idea—that of dodging the fear of death when it came by living all his days in a state of mitigated terror.

In Holbein the preoccupation was perhaps natural, since his name means "Skull," and at times, as in the picture of *The Ambassadors*, he proved that he was

not oblivious of the fact. The "vein" cropped up from time to time in his later works: thus in the rather inferior and very much damaged portrait of Sir Brian Tuke, now at Munich, the hour-glass is in the front of the picture, whilst the background is filled by a skeleton presentation of Death with his lethal instrument. We might almost regard the great *Meier Madonna* as containing one more of these warnings, since, with her shroud half concealing her face, behind the living wife kneels the dead Dorothea Kannegiesser whom Holbein had so beautifully painted a decade before.

With this famous Madonna and what I am tempted to call the infamous portraits of Dorothea Offenburg, Holbein seems once more to re-emerge from the shades into the Basle of 1526. The *Madonna* is another of the Holbeins that has a "wonder" attaching to it. For centuries the Dresden copy was accredited the real work: for a long time it was considered to be the lost *Household of Sir Thomas More*. Then came the discovery in Paris in 1822 of the real picture.

It is really neither here nor there whether the Dresden picture be a copy by another artist or a replica by Holbein himself. It is sufficient that, until one has seen the Darmstadt picture, one may hold the Dresden version to be another work of which *ne plus ultra* might be written. But, if one travels swiftly from one picture to the other, one is conscious of a strange sensation—of the deepening of a sensation. The Dresden *Madonna* is prettified: the Darmstadt is overwhelming. The Dresden has retired, as it were, on to a comparatively commonplace footing: the Darmstadt masterpiece comes right forward. The Dresden picture one looks at: one seems to be actually *in* the one at Darmstadt.

And indeed this last is the "note" of the real

picture : it is absolutely intimate : it is precisely the *Household of a Man* in which the Mother of God moves as in the midst of her family and ours. The mere crumpling of the carpet which in the other version is straightened out and rather ugly—that detail adds to the intimate note—even the comparative ill-favouredness of the Madonna adds to it. The other picture seems to have been altered to satisfy the criticism of a commonplace mind. One seems to have heard a voice say before the Darmstadt picture : "The Madonna is *too* familiar ; she should be idealized ; Dorothea is *too* ugly and grim, tone her down ; the alcove is *too* low to be elegant ! " And either some very clever copyist, or Holbein in one of his more dangerous moods, did this thing.

It damages the lines of the composition as much as it spoils the poetry of the subject ; it worries with its interpolated shadows the eye which rests so gratefully upon the lighter surface of the real picture; it achieves a comparatively cheap, "anybody's" dramatic effect at the expense of that very tranquillity which is the highest of Holbein's qualities—at the expense of that very tranquillity which is, in a tiresome and sad world, the most blessed gift which Holbein had to bestow on humanity. It is, the Dresden *Madonna*, a picture we are proud to admire. The picture at Darmstadt is one that, having stood our little time before, we carry away with us to be a consoler for ever in those moments when we are so happy as to call it to mind. The two *Dorothea Offenburgs* are in their way works as fine. At this time Holbein had reached a level of skill that he never much surpassed, from which, if anything, he declined slightly into mannerisms. At any rate many of his later portraits have a mellowness which, if one happens to be in the mood for something very actual, sends us

back gratefully to the *Laïs Corinthiaca*. It has not, of course, the tremendous force of the portrait of Holbein's wife and children : it is, in a sense, more amateurish—or rather more experimental—as a painting than the *Christina of Milan* : but in its beautiful lines and masses, its fresh and vivid colour, and its wonderfully actual drawing—its " motion "—it has qualities that they have not. It stands, to my mind, along with the Louvre portrait of Erasmus : it has that quality of dramatic interruption of which I have spoken in writing of the portrait of Amerbach.

The *Dorothea as Venus* has all these qualities in a lesser degree : the painting is less vivid, the drawing less convincing, the possibilities of the face—as if Holbein at that time had not so well studied it—are made less of, the lines of the shoulders are less arrestingly sumptuous : it is, as it were, a Dresden version to the Darmstadt of the *Laïs*—and it seems to me to be almost an argument that both the *Meier Madonnas* may be by Holbein.

That, however, is mere phantasy. What is interesting is that by this time Holbein, in his dated paintings, seems to have got rid of the trick of loading his backgrounds with Renaissance architecture and what not. The background of the Darmstadt *Madonna* is nearly simplicity itself ; behind the head of Erasmus is nothing but a green surface with some decorative stars ; behind the Dorotheas is merely a curtain. He seems to have realized that, by this time, his marvellous painting was a tower in itself, and from this date onward it is only in " display " portraits that he troubles himself to be very elaborate.

These, it is significant to observe, are, firstly, *The Household of Sir Thomas More*, with which he " introduced " himself to the English on his first visit ; secondly, the portrait of Gisze, with which he " intro-

Hanfstaengl.

Bishop Stokesley of London
(Windsor).

duced" himself, equally, to the German merchants of the Steelyard on his second coming here. The *Henries VII and VIII and their Consorts* was also by way of being an introduction, and possibly also the *Ambassadors*, since the two sitters might serve to spread his fame into whatever mysterious court they were accredited from. At any rate, from this time onward, except in such special cases, the master seems to have thrown his glove down to posterity: the human face, the human shape, these were the "subjects" with which he was to make his appeal. And this "subject" being the simplest and the most difficult with which a painter can deal, it seems to follow that the achievement is the highest possible. It takes to itself no adventitious aids: it relies upon painting pure and simple.

VI

IN the late summer of 1526 Holbein left Basle for England. His motives for so doing are not of the first importance and they have been fully discussed by many people. Some will have it that he was unhappy at home; some that his imbroglio with Dorothea Offenburg drove him away. One authority credits him with an invitation to England from a great English lord: it seems more probable that More called to him. No doubt, too, times in Basle were very evil for him, since to all other painters they were very evil. Already painting was an art in disrepute in a Basle coming more and more rapidly under the sway of Lutheranism. Holbein, as I have said, served both masters impartially—for the one side he painted the Madonna, for the other he illustrated pamphlets so violent that they must needs be burned. But for the moment Lutheranism offered only pamphlets. To find room for paintings, Holbein must find a land where there were convents still and churches not whitewashed. It is an interesting little incident, as showing Holbein actually in contact with the troubles of his time, that, when he claimed the painting materials—and more particularly the gold—that his father had left in a monastery he was painting in before his death, the answer he received was that the monastery had been burned by the peasants and that if Holbein desired the gold he must go seek it amid the ashes.

Archbishop Warham
(Windsor).

Hanfstaengl.

The Godsalves (Dresden).

Practically the only other Basle evidences of his life—save for the letter from Erasmus—are the *Dorothea* pictures. One may read into them what one likes. It is usual to consider that, since Holbein painted her first as *Venus* and then as *Laïs*, he must first have been guilelessly in love with her, and then have turned upon his mistress. The amiable apologists for Holbein write eloquently upon the wrongs that he must have suffered at her pretty but itching palms. But it has always seemed to me that if a man has enjoyed a woman's favours, it is discreditable of him afterwards to call her even well-deserved names, however excellent an organ his voice may be, and if I were anxious to apologize for the painter, I should simply adopt another line. I mean that there is no documentary evidence to connect Holbein with Dorothea: thus the portraits may have been commissioned by some other of the very many ill-used lovers of the thus immortalized and beautiful Laïs.

I do not know that it is a matter of much importance. Holbein cannot very easily be whitewashed, since his will gives indisputable evidence of his having led a not strictly regular life in this country. Such things, of course, were not uncommon in those distant days, and Holbein might plead the "artistic temperament" to-day. And gossip says too that he was "unhappy at home"—so that apparently for once the desire of the critic to limit his remarks to the man's work, and the desire of the world and his wife to know about everything else, may be brought to coincide. For it would appear that the less we say about Holbein the man—the better.

It is, of course, true that the important thing about a picture is how it is painted, and that the subject matters, by comparison, very little. Nevertheless it is an added, extraneous pleasure—a pleasure added

rather to what is called *belles lettres* than to the fine arts—when such a painter as Holbein comes upon "interesting sitters." I mean that the charm of Roper's "Life of Sir Thomas More" is infinitely enhanced by looking at Holbein's *Household*—just as the interest of the whole history of the period is made alive for us by Holbein's portraits of Henry VIII's court. Without the court to draw, painting only peasants or fishwives, Holbein would have been a painter just as great. Henry VIII and his men would be lifeless without Holbein. You have only to think how comparatively cold we are left by the name, say, of Edward III, a great king surrounded by great men in a stirring period. No visual image comes to the mind's eye; at most we see, imaginatively, coins and the seals that depend from charters. Thus, if oblivion be not a boon, an age may be thankful for such artists as Holbein. That most wonderful age in which he lived seemed, too, to be well aware of it—since so many of the great sought the immortality that his hand was to confer.

We who come after may well be thankful that Holbein paid when he did his first short visit to this country. Along with the portraits of the splendid opportunists who flourished or fell when the end of the old world came at the fall of More, he has left us some at least of the earlier and more attractive men of doomed principles. Along with More's there decorated then the page of English history the name of Warham, who, for mellow humanitarianism, exceeded Cranmer, his successor, as far as More exceeded Thomas Cromwell in the familiar virtues—and Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, who as far exceeded the later Gardiner. Being men of principle, set in high places, these were doomed to tragedy; and, if Warham died actually in his bed, it needs only Holbein's portrait

Hanfstaengl.

Sir Henry Guildford

(Windsor).

Hanfstaengl.

Robert Cheseman, the Royal Falconer (The Hague).

to assure us that, if the shadows of the future can still affect us on our last pillows, this great man saw, on his deathbed, things enough to make him haggard. Fisher's head has about its eyes a greater intrepidity—but the expression on both is the same ; and in these two heads we may see very well how two great men envisaged their stormy times.

Of the portrait of Warham there are two copies in oil extant—both apparently by Holbein, the one in the Louvre, the other at Lambeth : the latter is, I think, the finer example. The oil picture of the *Household of More* has, of course, vanished ; but the drawing, a mere sketch with annotations by More, is in Basle, and there are studies for the heads at Windsor. Perhaps, however, the best portrait-picture of this visit to England is the Dresden *Thomas and John Godsalve*, in which the head of the elder man has always appeared to me to be one of the finest pieces of Holbein's painting. The Windsor portrait of *Sir Henry Guildford* is more generally preferred ; to my taste it is too much overloaded with decoration—though this was probably to the taste of Sir Henry, a commonplace gentleman whose successful career was much aided by the king's friendship, and whose position at court made him to a large extent *arbiter elegantiarum*. Thus the portrait has some of the nature of a " display " picture.

But upon the whole, and if no question of pecuniary value or labour expended need influence, I should be inclined to prefer to either, the wonderful, alert *Portrait of an Englishwoman*, in two chalks, in Basle, or the almost more wonderful body-colour *Portrait of an Englishman* in the Berlin Royal Cabinet. These little drawings of an hour or so are so inexpressibly alive in every touch that the more minutely you examine them, the more excited you will become.

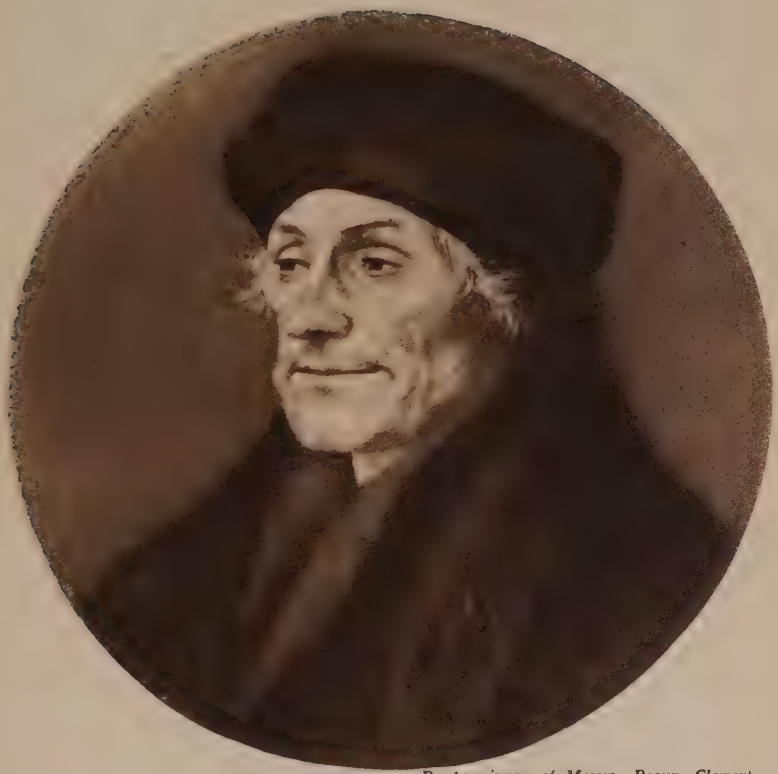
In the finished paintings one is presented with a mystery : in these drawings one has the very heart of the secret. Each stroke that one looks at seems to unfold an envelope of the bud—at each unfolding one discovers that the secret lies a little deeper. I suppose Holbein himself could not have told how it was done.

But, of course, these drawings and all the earlier paintings take, as it were, their hats off to the portrait of Holbein's wife and children. As in the case of most of the really impressive portraits of the world, there is here no background, no detailed accessory to worry the beholder's eye. The figures in the picture exist just as at first sight a great human individuality exists. One has no eyes for the chair he sits in nor much for the kind of clothes he may wear. He overcomes these things and makes them no part of his individuality that they are as much taken for granted as are the number of his fingers. And it is precisely the property of the great portrait that it makes its subject always a great man. It brings out the fact that *every* man is great if viewed from the sympathetic point of view—great, that is, not in the amount of actions done, but in the power of waking interest. It brings out, in fact, in what way its subject is " typical," since great art is above all things generous, like the strong and merciful light of the sun that will render lovable the meanest fields, the barest walls.

And such a great portrait as this is notable as explaining what must be, always, the artist's ambition —that his work shall look " not like a picture." When one stands before it one is not conscious of a break in atmospheric space : one does not subconsciously say : " Here the air of the room ends : here is the commencement of the picture's atmosphere."

Hanfstaengl.

Sir Brian Tuke (Munich).



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Erasmus (Basle).

The figures in the picture are figures in the room. It is not, of course, a matter of a Pre-Raphaelite attempt to " deceive the eye " by a kind of stippling as if the painter had attempted with cuttle-fish to smooth out the traces of his tool, for the tool is frankly accepted and the brush marks visible enough.

The large, plain woman, with the unattractive children, lives before us, luminous, throwing back the light with that subdued quality of reflection that all human flesh possesses. She is an entity that one cannot question; she is not so much a type as a representative of the womanhood of a whole race. She is, I mean, not an allegorical figure representing " United Motherhood of the Teutonic Family "; she is an individual mother who will make us think of the troubles of maternity. What *is* typical in the picture is her quiescence. She is not represented as washing, feeding her children, or scolding. As an individual figure she is given in as " all round " a mood as was possible: in a period of reverie she is thinking of actions to come or of actions past.

One so exhausts superlatives in these days that there seem to be none left in which to speak of the almost perfect drawing of the woman's shoulders and head, of the harmony of the whole design, on whose surface, or rather in whose depths, the eye travels so pleasantly from place to place. The woman's hands are particularly worth looking at—the masterly way in which the one on the boy's shoulder shows in its lines that it rests heavily, and the way in which the pressure on the baby's waist is indicated.

This great work was painted in oil colours on paper which has since been cut out along the outlines of the figures and affixed to a panel. It was the work of 1528–29, when Holbein was once more in Basle. He had bought himself a house and perhaps had designs

of settling down in the Swiss town for good. He seems to have found employment mainly in designs for printers and jewellers, though the small round painting of Erasmus at Basle and the similar portrait of Melanchthon now in Hanover appear to belong to this period. 1529 was the year of the greatest tribulation for Swiss painters; nevertheless in 1530 the Basle Town Council commissioned Holbein to continue his decorations of the town hall. The frescoes themselves have vanished, but, to account for them, we have the drawing of *Rehoboam* and the magnificent *Samuel and Saul*, which is to my mind the finest of all Holbein's quasi-decorative subject pictures.

The way in which, in this drawing, the figures of the marching troops, of the king, and of the arresting prophet are rendered actual, and at the same time blended into one composition with the strictly decorative scroll-work of smoke from the blazing background, proves that Holbein had at this time reached the very high-water mark of genius—of genius which is the comprehension of the scope possible to a certain class of design. It is decoration achieved, not by the multiplication of arbitrary details and not by the arbitrary treatment of actual forms, but by the selection of natural objects fitted to fill and to make beautiful a certain space. It is the sort of selection that is given to most of us at rare moments. Thus I remember seeing, whilst I was making a final tour for the purposes of this book, a number of workmen taking a siesta along the bottom of a sunlit wall. There may have been thirty of them, in various but similar attitudes, on the ground, and nearly all of them wore blue blouses. This similarity of their attitudes and costumes and the straight line that they made brought to my lips at once the words: "If only Holbein had seen that!" I suppose that I had my mind full of the

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George Gisze,

Merchant of the Steelyard (Berlin).

Hanfstaen"

A Merchant of the Steelyard

(Windsor)

little frieze of *Dancing Peasants* that there is in the Basle Museum.

But with these decorations of the council chamber the possibilities of work for Holbein in Basle seem to have been exhausted. It is true that he was given the painting of a town clock and paid rather extravagantly for the work. But Erasmus, Amerbach, and the other Humanists had shaken from their feet the dust of a city given up apparently to tragic iconoclasts, and for Basle, as for Italy, it might be said that that lustre 1525–30 saw the end of the Renaissance. That particularly good old time had come to an end.

It was natural that Holbein should seek to recapture what he could of it—to chase westward the glimmer of that setting sun. So he returned to England. He left his family apparently well provided for : his children at least seem to have kept their heads very well above water. Subsequently the Basle Town Council did their best to induce him to return. They offered him, as did Venice to Dürer, a rather princely retaining fee, stipulating only that he should reside for a part of each year in the city. Holbein appears to have thought of accepting the offer, but he had not yet done so when, ten years later, the plague cut short his days in London.

His career subsequent to his coming to this country is fairly deducible. More, his patron, and Lord Chancellor of the kingdom, fell very soon after Holbein arrived and before he could benefit the painter at all. A set of new men became all-powerful with the coming of Thomas Cromwell, and, for a time at least, Holbein could do little to attract their notice. It was then, apparently, that he set himself to gain the patronage of the Merchants of the Steelyard, a corporation of Germans securely established in London, men

most of them of great wealth, and no doubt of some taste.

So Holbein painted the celebrated portrait of George Gisze. I must confess that it leaves me rather cold. The man himself is wonderfully painted and the colour of the whole picture is fresh and attractive. So, too, each of the too many accessories is brilliantly put upon the canvas. But it is in consequence difficult to see the wood for the trees, and Holbein is guilty of wrenching the hands of Gisze into an unnatural attitude in order that the spectator may read the superscription of the letter the merchant holds. Nevertheless, though the whole picture be a feat of an inartistic kind, it is none the less a feat that we may feel glad to have beheld. For, as Dr. Johnson says in a passage that I remember but cannot recapture, it enlarges our ideas of what mankind can do if we witness some such achievement of leger-demain as seeing sixteen balls kept in the air by one man.

The picture served its purpose in attracting the custom of other merchants of the Steelyard, many of whom remain immortalized in galleries throughout Europe. Those at Vienna and Berlin are notably fine, and we have reason to be thankful that in the matter of detail Holbein did not keep these later works up to the sample of the *George Gisze*.

The subsequent career of Holbein was one of steady work and of steady rise in the world. We find him very soon painting the portrait of Cheseman, the king's falconer, and very soon afterwards those of the greater courtiers. It is customary to conjecture that he owed this latter employment to the patronage of some particular eminent personage. I think we might be content to ascribe it to the eminence of his gifts in portraiture in an age when the rich and powerful

Hanfstaengl.

John Chambers, the Physician

Hanfstaengl.

Henry the Eighth (Windsor).

were particularly anxious to have memorials of themselves, and to his skill in designing jewellery in an age when the sovereign as part of a settled policy was ruining his great nobles by forcing them to a lavish expenditure.

But, if it be necessary to ascribe his rise to any one patron, we have the man to our hands in Thomas Cromwell, then already all-powerful, and then already in contact with those Germans the ultimate alliance with whom was to cause his downfall. At that time Cromwell was wildly lavish in expending, upon what we should now call articles of virtu, the enormous sums that were at his disposal in the way of bribes and peculations from the monasteries that he was dissolving. His agents all over Europe were engaged in looking out for him the most elaborate of Flemish furniture, the most costly works of goldsmiths, pictures, and globes of the earth. When he could he duplicated these purchases, retaining one example for the collection that he was making, that his son Gregory might become a great lord. The duplicate he presented to the king, whom he kept as far as he could in a good humour with almost daily gifts.

Considering how elaborate was his system of spies, it would have been difficult for Cromwell to remain in ignorance of Holbein's existence in the land; and considering his tastes and necessities, it would have been strange had he neglected to use the painter. We find him actually writing Holbein's name early in February 1538, when, after the death of Jane Seymour, Philip Hoby was sent about Europe to inspect marriageable princesses:

"*Instruccions given by the Lord Cromwell to Philip Hoby sent over by him to the dutchesse of Loreigne and after to the dutchesse of Millane.* . . .

". . . Then shall he desire to know her (Christina

of Milan) pleaser when Mr Hanns shall comme to her for the doing of his feat in the taking of her picture. And so hauinge the time appointed he shall go with him or tarrie behind as she shall appointe."

The result of this journey was of course the matchless portrait—but the "feat" was not as remarkable as one serious historian avers; he did not "finish his picture in three hours," though probably he spent no more over the small sketch which he made in this as in all other cases, and no doubt he finished the picture, either in London or Brussels, from memory. Holbein was by that time official painter to Henry VIII. It has been conjectured that he was exhorted by Cromwell to flatter Anne of Cleves in the portrait of that lady. The portrait shows a princess by no means ill-favoured—but we have historical evidence to prove that Anne was really considered beautiful by her countrymen, and we have not any particular evidence that proves that even Henry considered her repulsive except for reasons of State.

At any rate, to the extent that the portrait had an influence, Holbein was an actor in History in the Large. It was in or about 1536 that he had been made painter royal. In that year he painted the portrait of the Queen Jane Seymour; soon after, the fresco of *Henries VII and VIII with their Queens*; soon after, he designed the Jane Seymour cup. He continued making portraits and designs until his death by the plague in November 1543. Even after his death a design of his came as a New Year offering to the king. His will shows that he left some illegitimate children; stray letters show that he had a few friends in London; the Record Office documents show that he drew his salary habitually in advance—as thus, from the King's Payments:

Hanfstaengl.

Jane Seymour (Vienna).

Hanfstaengl

Anne of Cleves (The Louvre).

Hanfstaengl.

Derick Born (Windsor).

"Apl. 1540. *Hans Holbyn* the K's Painter in advancement of his wages for one half year beforehand since Michaelmas last, 15. li.

"Mich. 1540. *Hans Holbyn: nihil quia prius warrantum.*"

And so as a personality he passes out of the historian's ken.

VII

I OPENED this little monograph with a pseudo-comparison of Dürer with Holbein: of course the two are not comparable. For if, to continue the use of a simile of my first page, Holbein be a mountain peak in a chain of hills, we must write Dürer down as a Titanic cloud form, one of a range that on a clear day we may see towering up behind the mountain. The two men differ in kind and in species. Holbein could no more have conceived the *Great Fortune* than Dürer could have painted the *Christina of Milan*: Dürer could not refrain from commenting upon life, Holbein's comments were of little importance.

That essentially was the ultimate difference between the two: it is a serviceable thing to state, since in trying to ascertain the characteristics of a man it is as useful to state what he is not as what he is. Dürer, then, had imagination where Holbein had only vision and invention—an invention of a rough-shod and everyday kind. But, perhaps for that very reason, the subjects of Holbein's brush—in his portraits—are seen as it were through a glass more limpid. To put it with exaggerated clearness: we may *believe* in what Holbein painted, but in looking at Dürer's work we can never be quite assured that he is an unprejudiced transcriber. You will get the comparison emphasized if you will compare Holbein's drawing of Henry VIII with the etching by Cornelis Matsys

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Christina, Duchess of Milan

(National Gallery)

of the year 1543. The drawing is an unconcerned rendering of an appallingly gross and miserable man; the etching seems as if, with every touch of his tool, the artist had been stabbing in little exclamation notes of horror. The drawing leaves one thinking that no man could be more ugly than Henry; the etching forces one to think that no artist could imagine any man more obscene.

Holbein, in fact, was a great Renderer. If I wanted to find a figure really akin to his I think I should go to music and speak of Bach. For in Bach you have just that peculiar Teutonic type of which Holbein is so great an example: in the musician too you have that marvellous mastery of the instrument, that composure, that want of striving. And both move one by what musicians call "absolute" means. Just as the fourth fugue of the "Wohltemperierte Klavier" is profoundly moving—for no earthly reason that one knows—so is the portrait of Holbein's family. The fugue is beautiful in spite of a relatively ugly "subject," the portrait is beyond praise in spite of positively ugly sitters. And there is in neither anything extraneous: the fugue, unaided by "programme," is pure music; the portrait, unaided by literary ideas, is simply painting.

The quality of the enjoyment that we can get from the works of these two is also very precisely identical. I do not know how long the Duke of Norfolk's portrait of Christina of Milan has hung in the National Gallery: it must have been there many years, since I can hardly remember a "myself" in which the idea of that "symphony" in blues and blacks did not play an integral part of my pleasures. I would rather possess that painting than any other object in the world, I think, and I have visited the National Gallery, I do not know how many times,

simply to stand in front of it—simply to stand and to think nothing. It is not for me a picture; it is not even a personage with whom I am in love. But simply a mood—a mood of profound lack of thought, of profound self-forgetfulness, which assuredly is the most blessed thing which Art, in this rather weary world, can vouchsafe to a man—descends upon me in front of that combination of paints upon that canvas.

It is not merely this portrait that can evoke this mood in us—it is the very quality of Holbein. I happen to possess a very excellent set of reproductions—made for a private person—of the series of Windsor sketches for portraits. One can pass hours with such things as these on the floor before one's chair. Here is the court of Henry VIII, from the Groom Falconer to the Earl Marshal. But it is not the former careers of the dead queens, the tiny features of the little prince, or the heavy jowl and weary eyes of the most unhappy king—it is not the history, the intrigue, the gossip of a small kingdom then barbaric and insignificant enough. Here is Regina Anna Bulleyn; but this is not the queen who was done to death by false witnesses. A comely, large-featured, slightly sardonic face looks down not very intently upon a book. But it is neither queen nor face that holds those of us who are attuned to the quality that we call "Holbein": it is a certain collocation of lines, of masses.

We are, literally, in love with this arrangement of lines, of lights and of shadows. The eye is held by no object, but solely by the music of the pattern—the quality that we call "Holbein." It is a quality; it is a feeling; it is a method of projection that one admires—and that one might well speak of in the peculiar phraseology that is reserved for one's admiration of musicians. Thus when one asks another,

Hanfstaengl.

Robert Southwell

(Uffizi)

Hanfstaengl.

The Duke of Norfolk
(Windsor).

" Do you like Beethoven ? " he implies, not " Do you like an old, sardonic, deaf man ? " or " Do you like the Ninth Symphony or any other individual work ? " —but " Are you pleasurably affected when the name Beethoven calls up in you certain emotions—emotions that you have felt when certain notes followed certain others in an intangible sequence ; a sequence that cannot be analysed, but which is ' Beethoven ' ? "

The quality, the power of Holbein is similar. When we recall him to mind, no particular work of his " sticks out " in the mind's eye. He is a mass, or a force ; he calls up a mood.

This characteristic is most marked when one considers the work that he did after his final establishment in England. One may use a *cliché* phrase so that it becomes, in this case, vivid and actual : he poured out a stream of pictures. They are better or worse than each other only in accordance with the beholder's private preferences ; just as, in a stream, different men standing at different points on the bank and seeing different facets of the ripples see differing lights and shadows differing. You may above all things care for the *Ambassadors*, which moves me very little ; I shall never be contented with praise of the *Duke of Norfolk* of Windsor, or the *Unbekannte Dame* of Vienna. Yet, in the mass and after the review, you and I may both set the abstraction we call " Holbein " at the same very high level.

He has always seemed to me to be the earliest of " modern " painters—to have looked at men and women, first of all, with the " modern " eye. If you glance rapidly along the series of sketches at Windsor you will be astounded to see how exactly they resemble the faces you will pass in the Windsor streets. If you compare them with, say, Lely's portraits of a later court, the characteristic becomes even more marked,

since Lely's men and women died a century or so later than Holbein's—and have yet been dead so much longer. He got out of his time—as he got *into* our time—with a completeness that few painters have achieved—hardly even Velasquez or Rembrandt.

The claim is not, really, a very high one : the modern eye looking at things in a rather humdrum and uninspired way. But, of course, the praise appears more high if we put it that Holbein's works may be said to have compelled us to look at things as we do, just as, after Palestrina, the ears of men grew gradually accustomed to hear music only in the modern modes. Artistically speaking, it means that Holbein, penetrating, as it were, through the disguise of costume, of hair-dressing, and of the very postures of the body and droop of the eyelids, seized on the rounded personalities—the underlying truths—of the individuals before him ; so that when one looks at the portrait of de Morett, or the wonderful sketch of a dark girl with a figure that rakes back, one neither notices the clothes of the one nor the absence of clothes of the other. Æsthetically, of course, the painting of the clothes and ornaments has a value of its own—in the portrait of de Morett it leads up to and supports the heavy and sagacious face—but, until we consciously examine it for our own æsthetic ends, we are not really aware of the clothes at all, and the figure before us might be that of any prime minister, plumber, or book publisher of to-day.

It is only in the " display " portraits—the *George Gisze* type of which I have spoken despitefully at some length—that the " human interest " sinks into the background. And even these might have been satisfying works of art had Holbein been content to take hold of absolutely the other end of the stick—I mean, had he been content absolutely to subordinate the

Portraits of Man and Woman
(Vienna).

The Ambassadors (National Gallery).

portrait of the man to the painting of the accessories ; so that, as it were, we should have had a portrait of an inkpot and a carnation with a background of Gisze.

Such a feat would have been nothing to Holbein. In his earlier—but not earliest—decorative designs, in such a piece as the *Man of Sorrows* of the Basle diptych, he balanced very fairly the accessories of pillar and arch with the human figure. In this, be it admitted, neither the figure nor the accessories are conceived in a plane of "actuality"; they remain in that half-dreamland which is the decorative world, whilst the *George Gisze* portrait belongs to that mood of Holbein which has been called his most realistic.

In the last phase of his painting the former type of work sank absolutely into the background, and in the wonderful series of portraits that are our Holbein, neither in the background nor in the fore does there appear any trace of that Renaissance luxuriousness that, in his earlier pictures, filled us with amazement and respect for his fertility of invention. The columns and the cherubs have gone together from the picture. But when one looks in museums and discovers such masterpieces as the title-page portrait of Erasmus with the god Terminus one realizes how much Holbein has mended and how little altered his ways. The painting of the portrait comes as near Renaissance perfection as any Suabian could be expected to attain. Dürer, as I have said, abandoned Renaissance ideas because they were pagan : Holbein dropped them out of his canvases because the actual world as he saw it no longer had a place for them. But in the particular realm where his fancy had a legitimate scope and unlimited plains on which to perform gambados and demivolts he pursued the loves of his childhood into all sorts of skyey distances. He refined until the least

sympathetic must admire; he invented until our wonder at his powers of invention melts into a nearly perfect sympathy.

In these decorative feats of his—his designs for bands of gold, his dagger-sheaths, his loving-cups—his is the braver spirit of the two main streams of "decoration." His spirit—and it is, of course, the primitive and the pagan—impelled him to cover every inch of his surface with ornament, to tighten the screw more and more and more in that prodigal direction. There must be always more cherubs, more vine leaves, more foxes, more grapes, until even the original, sinuous main design of branch and stem is cut into and vanishes. Thus the general effect of one of his designs for dagger-sheaths is almost that of the pebbles that tessellate the bottoms of certain trout streams. The eye follows lines along them and is agreeably diverted without fixing upon any one point, main current, or figure. The same tendency accounts for what pleasure one feels in looking at such a *tour de force* as the woodcut of the celebrated *Table of Cebes*. Here it is true Holbein presents us with all the incidents of a Pilgrim's Progress; but considered as "realism" the page has no value, and allegorically it is unimpressive. The total effect, the "look," of the whole thing is nevertheless agreeable.

Nothing was further from Holbein's spirit—and nothing indeed is further from the spirit of his nation and age—than any idea that great results can be obtained with small means. He belonged to a nation to whom display was and remains the readiest means of indicating value of whatever sort. Simplicity and severity were probably distasteful enough to him. Thus nothing could have been further from his sympathy than what is best in modern decorative art, and he had little or no idea, beyond that enforced

The Sieur de Morette

(Dresden)

by the exigencies of space, of adapting his design to the form of the object to be decorated or of reducing the amount of ornament further and further until the best decorated space be that which contains the least ornament. *His* dukes would never have been the worst dressed men of a House of Peers.

His is the other end of our line, in this as in so many other things, and to appreciate him thoroughly we have to make mental efforts of one kind and another. As we might put it, he was vulgar, which we are not, but he had more blood and more hope, so that he achieved the impossible so many times, and climbing in places where we are accustomed to say that climbing is wrong or hopeless, he appears on peaks more high than any of ours. That, of course, is what the master does in the realm of the arts.

I have employed freely the words "actual" and "realist" in speaking of Holbein's work, and in that I have followed the example of many who use the terms either panegyrically or in contempt. But in the modern sense he was little of a realist, dealing rather in the typical. One can exemplify this best in such drawings as the very beautiful and celebrated "ship" design. Our present-day "realist" would give us some moment from the career of some actual ship. But Holbein's is hardly an actual ship at all. It can hardly have been drawn from the life, since, even in that day when ships absurdly unmanageable, top-heavy, and unsteerable made voyages the mere idea of which turns the hair of the modern sailor grey—even in that day no ship so absolutely unballasted would have set sail from any port. But Holbein had got into his head, had made part of his ideas, a representative ship. He had seen ships perhaps at Lyons, perhaps in the Channel, and he evolved from his mind a typical form. Equally, too, he had seen

ships set sail, had seen men being seasick, had seen fat warrior-sailors on board embracing fat women, had seen bumboats casting off, had seen pots of beer handed up to a masthead and gigantic standard-bearers casting loose their flags to the breeze. But in bringing all these things together into his design he overwhelms one with the idea that he could never, upon any one setting sail of a ship, have seen so much at one moment. Thus, admirable and actual as each detail of the drawing is, it impresses one not as a realistic shadowing of any incident, but as an almost didactic portrayal of what it might be possible to see. It is as if he wished to show men of the inlands who had never seen a ship as much as possible in one drawing.

Of course his real purpose may have been no more than a note to remind himself, as in the case of the *Bat* and *Lamb* drawings. But that semi-didactic spirit is visible in much else of his work. It seems to fill the *Dance of Death* series, which, as it were, exclaims continually, "See what Death can do!" And it is the "real" note of all his portraits. Whilst going to the bottom of each individual, whilst absolutely searching out his most usable qualities, he seems to be selecting those saliences which will make the individual really noticeable. Dürer wrote upon his drawings: "This is how the Knights rode in armour in 1515." Holbein tries to force us to see in his portrait of the Lady Parker: "This is how women of the narrow-eyed, small-nosed, wide-mouthed, tiny-waisted type looked in the year 1537." Or, in an exaggerated form the *George Gisze* shows us the merchant with all his arms around him.

This last is, of course, merely material—but it is a material indication of the artist's psychological approach to his sitters. He does not, as I have said, take them in their "moments," he does not show them under

Portrait Study for Reskymer of Cornwall

(Windsor)

Portrait Study for the Lady Parker (Windsor).

violent lights or in the grasp of strong passions. He rounds them off, catching them always at moments when the illumination, both of the actual atmosphere and of their souls, was transfused and shone all round them. Thus he has left us a picture of his world, as it were, upon a grey day.

Other artists are giving us more light, others again have given us both more light and more shadow, or more shadow alone. But no other artist has left a more sincere rendering of his particular world, and no other artist's particular world is compact of simulacra more convincing, more illusory, or more calculated to hold our attentions. He has redeemed a whole era for us from oblivion, and he has forced us to believe that his vision of it was the only feasible one. This is all that the greatest of Art can do, whether it takes us into a world of the artist's fancy or into one of his fellow-men. And by rescuing from oblivion these past eras it confers upon us, to the extent of its hold, a portion of that herb oblivion, a portion of that forgetfulness of our own selves, which is the best gift that Art has to bestow.